

PROMOTING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION (UBE) SERVICE DELIVERY

Background

Since the advent of Nigeria's democratic dispensation in 1999, the outcomes of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) system have attracted close scrutiny from a vast majority of stakeholders. The crisis in the basic education sector in Nigeria manifests in the reality of young citizens, who passed through the system, but who can hardly read or write. Also, many pupils, especially in the rural areas who have gone through the nine years of compulsory basic education lack the numeracy and social cohesion skills required to function effectively in a fast-changing world. This recurrent production of beneficiaries of the UBE system, who have largely received no quality content will hamper Nigeria's quest to drastically reduce poverty and attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



A poorly constructed school building which collapsed pillar tragically killed Master Musa Umaru, an 11-year-old pupil of Umar Isa LGEA Primary School, Dembo in Zaria Local Government Area of Kaduna State.

In the first place, the untoward situation with basic education accentuates the extreme poverty in the land, especially as wards who pass through an ineffective educational system are unable to take advantage of economic opportunities and possibilities to better their lives. It is therefore not surprising that there has been a recurrence of data pointing to how millions of citizens continue to slide into the trap of extreme poverty. The latest of such is the World Bank, which noted that in the context of COVID-19, Nigerians who had managed to climb out of poverty could slide back. The bank canvassed the position that alleviating the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis is vital for preventing poverty from deepening and increasing in Nigeria. The bank's data indicates that before the crisis, approximately 4 in 10 Nigerians were living below the national poverty line, and millions more were living just above the poverty line, making them vulnerable to falling back into poverty when shocks occur.¹

¹See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/brief/monitoring-covid-19-impact-on-nigerian-households>

The soundness of the basic education framework, and its capacity to produce pupils who have the skills to contribute to the economy through technological innovation, is crucial to reducing poverty. The UBE was launched in 1999 with the goal of providing free, universal and compulsory basic education for every Nigerian child of age 6-15 years. The actual implementation of the programme however, did not become a reality immediately due to lack of legal backing. The programme nevertheless commenced in April 2004 after the signing of Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act.

As a major national policy on education aimed at educating a greater number of Nigerian children, UBE is the 2004 Act designed to provide basic education for 9 years duration comprising of six years of primary and 3 years of junior secondary education, both of which were programmed to be free. As an all-encompassing educational policy at that levels, provision for adult and non-formal education at primary and junior secondary education are also

Gap between policy and practice

The key instruments and resources for implementation of UBE initiatives were established in the UBE Act and National Policy on Education, which were revised in 2004. Since the success of any initiative is largely dependent upon its solid finance base and transparent management, the Act made provision for UBE finances from multiple Federal Government grants of not less than 2% of its consolidated revenue fund. The funding mechanism also provided the leeway for local and international partner donations. Unfortunately, despite this robust framework aimed at transforming the quality and outcomes of the basic education system, many factors continue to undermine the system. One dimension, which has hampered the delivery of the laudable objectives of the UBE, is the lack of transparency and accountability in the UBE services.

The policy planners also took cognisance of prevalence of out of school children. To ensure effective coordination, the law makes provision for Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), a federal government agency saddle with the responsibility of coordinating and implementing all aspect of the UBE programme.

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This has contributed in no small measure to the poor quality of outcomes.

Recently, the United nations International children emergency funds (UNICEF's) 2018 report described Nigeria as having the highest population of out of school children in the world. According to the agency, between 10.5 million to 13.2 million Nigerian children are out of school, a number it described as the highest in the world. The data further showed that one out of every five Nigerian children was reported to be out of school². The problems militating against quality outcomes in UBE service delivery also came to the fore in the World Bank's report of 2015, which noted that public perception of the state and quality of basic education, as a social good, was largely negative.

²<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education.html>

According to the report, the unanimous perception of the public about basic education in Nigeria is that the quality of education offered is low as the standard is increasingly dropping. The aspect of lack of transparency and accountability, and how these affect basic education outcomes came to the fore as a major factor with debilitating effect on quality of UBE outcomes. Similarly, a survey conducted by GeoPoll in Nigeria, showed that “over half of respondents reported

that they frequently encounter corruption in public services, especially in the education sector.”³

Consequently, the ranking of Nigerian basic education processes and outcomes by international organizations has been most disappointing. As at 2017, UNESCO which acknowledged some marginal improvements in basic education delivery, ranked Nigeria 103 of 118 countries in its Education for All (EFA) development index. The index took into account Universal Primary Education, adult literacy, quality of education and gender parity.⁴

Roles of communities, civil society and the government

As a knowledge-driven platform of active citizens promoting human rights, democracy and accountable governance, CHRICED strongly believes that the right to basic education is one that should not be denied any citizen. However, citizens themselves need to take up the responsibility of holding duty bearers accountable to ensure quality basic education for which enormous public resources are allocated, is delivered effectively and efficiently. Since 2017, CHRICED with support from John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation has therefore been working to deepen transparency and accountability in the UBE service delivery process. The overarching goal of the project is to reduce corruption in UBE service delivery through enlightened citizen activism. An important aspect of the design of the project is the empowerment of local communities with knowledge and tools, with which they can hold duty bearers in the basic education delivery sector accountable.

Although the project focuses on three Local Government Areas of Kauru, Kubau and Zaria in Kaduna State, it holds wider ramifications for the UBE service delivery process across Nigeria. For instance, in the course of the project, CHRICED and members of its project communities had to confront the realities of lack of conducive learning environment, unavailability of basic facilities and equipment in schools, and the unacceptably high teacher-pupil ratio, which generally renders knowledge impartation ineffective. The project also had to address failures in the implementation of high-level policy meant to support quality service delivery in the UBE sector.

In the face of these challenges, CHRICED urged communities not to resort to lamentation, but to channel their energies to making accountability demands, which will in turn expose corruption and increase levels of transparency. Using the instrumentality of community structures like the Schools Based Management Committees meeting in regular town hall convening, CHRICED galvanized community stakeholders to get involved, and not to watch as onlookers.

On the side of the government actors, CHRICED through robust advocacies called for increased community leading to contract such that the beneficiaries of UBE services at the grassroots can track and report on all UBE projects. This acceptance of this strategy by the government served as deterrence and prevented the corruption in the forms of substandard construction in schools, abandonment of awarded contracts and other similar anomalies. The use of open contracting data equally helped communities to access information about contracts for schools in their areas, thereby preventing corruption. Importantly too, CHRICED campaigned to law enforcement agencies to investigate all forms of corruption in the UBE service delivery process with a view to punishing the contractors responsible.

³<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education.html>

⁴Ibid

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is obvious the UBE initiative in Nigeria needs to be rescued if the country's educational standard will not continue to be in shambles. Apart from the challenges stated earlier, one of the shortcomings of UBE identified by experts has been lack of effective coordination both at federal and state levels. The lack of coordination also reflected at the state level of UBE as different segment of the program. In most instances, the State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) are headed by Executive Chairmen appointed in all instances by the governor, with an attendant high risk of corruption.

Delays in releasing funds also hinder the actualization of the laudable objectives of the UBE. Between years 2000-2008 for instance, UNESCO reported that the sum of N22.6 billion allocated to some public educational institutions including UBEC by the Education Trust Fund was not accessed during the period.

Taking into consideration the poor outcomes from the UBE system since its establishment, it is critical for citizens to engage the most fundamental issues affecting the system.

A lot of public resources, financial and human are being thrown into the system with less than desirable results. CHRICED therefore calls on government, communities, civic organizations, the media and professional groups to work collectively to curb corruption and its debilitating effects on UBE service delivery. This can be realized through open contracting data, accountability demands, anti-corruption programs, and consistent reporting on UBE issues. It is similarly critical to educate the public and communities through public enlightenment campaign aimed at shifting passive attitudes to ensure communities frown at corruption and push for accountability in the UBE system.

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CHRICED Contact Details:

Phone: +234 (0) 703 398 2527, 703 386 5138

Website: www.chriced.org.ng

Email: chricedng@gmail.com

Facebook: [facebook.com/chricedng](https://www.facebook.com/chricedng)

Twitter: [@chricedng](https://twitter.com/chricedng)

Skype ID: chriced Nigeria

MacArthur
Foundation

Kano Office

No. 46 Lawan Dambazau Road,
Behind Ado Bayero Mall,
Gandun Albasa New Layout,
Kano State, Nigeria

Abuja Office

Suite C38/39, Emmanuel Plaza,
POW Mafemi Crescent, Jabi,
FCT-Abuja, Nigeria

Lagos Office

HEDA Suite, 2nd Floor,
20 Mojidi Street,
Off Toyin Street, Ikeja,
Lagos, Nigeria