

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION: THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** Education plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of individuals and societies, serving as an agent of change that fosters transformation and empowerment. University education, in particular, stands as a cornerstone for youth development, offering a platform to equip young people with the necessary skills and knowledge for personal and societal growth. As identified by the British Department for International Development (DFID), education is central to reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development, making it a critical tool in the global effort to address socio-economic challenges. In the context of Nigeria, university education is considered a key instrument for uplifting youth and breaking the cycle of poverty. It offers opportunities for critical thinking, technical skills, and social empowerment, ultimately contributing to the holistic development of individuals and communities. This paper examines the role of university education in Nigeria, focusing on its potential to alleviate poverty and promote long-term economic and social benefits. By analyzing the impact of higher education on youth development, the study aims to underscore the importance of investing in educational systems to foster a future workforce that is both skilled and socially responsible. The findings suggest that university education not only prepares youth for the labor market but also cultivates a sense of social responsibility, critical for nation-building and poverty reduction.

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**Keywords:** University Education, Youth Development, Poverty Alleviation, Empowerment, Social Transformation

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### INTRODUCTION

Education is an agent of change that presents a solid vehicle for the transformation and empowerment of citizens in a country. Education is sine-qua-non for development. British Department for International Development (DFID) sees education as an effective tool that should be used in the present attempt to half poverty by the year 2015. In the three stages of education, that is, primary, secondary and tertiary levels, university education is perceived as an instrument for empowerment that seeks to provide the youths with the skills required for sound social living.

Poverty can be located within the context for contradiction between resources available to an individual and the demand and condition of his/her environment (Ayo, 2007). Poverty is a dreaded condition of absence of capacity to maintain at least basic level of decent living. It is a hydra-headed condition which tends to restrict people from socio-economic opportunities. As a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon, poverty goes beyond condition of lack of resources. It extends to social inequality, insecurity, illiteracy, poor health, restricted or total lack of opportunity for personal growth and self-realization.

Onibokun and Kumuyi (1996) defined poverty as a way of life characterized by low intake, inaccessibility to adequate health facilities, low quality education, inaccessibility to various housing and societal facilities. Preece (2007) described poverty as a human condition characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.

Individuals who are victims of poverty are usually referred to as poor while nations suffering from its poverty are called poor nations. UNDP defined the poor as those people who are unskilled and employable, who as a result of little or no income are totally dependent on others for the satisfaction of their daily needs. Poor countries are marked by low productivity, alarming high population growth rate and pronounced gap between haves and have not most especially in term of access to health facility, quality and quantity of two intake and wide rural-urban divide.

The 191 member nations United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UMDGs) resolved that by 2015, extreme conditions of poverty and hunger will be eradicated. In addition, the proportion of those living on less than a dollar a day and those suffering from hunger would be halved (UNDP, 1998). In the year 2000, the United Nations International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank signed up an international commitment to halve global poverty by 2015 in the form of the millennium development goals. Barely two years after 2002, Nigeria designed a programme called National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) with the aim of determining the extent to which education has been recognized as a tool for effecting changes in the condition of poverty in Nigeria. Looking at this scenario, one would expect appreciable youth empowerment from these two giant sisters. Therefore, this paper is set out to find out whether these two sisters can significantly empower the Nigerian youths.

### **University education**

University education is the level of education a citizen proceeds to after secondary education with the broad aim to become a professional. It is the last stage of education which takes a minimum of four years completing 6-3-3-4. The broad aims of university education (NPE, 2004) stated that tertiary education shall:

1. Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower.
2. Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society (that is, psychomotor and cognitive domains development).
3. Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society (affect domain)

Are the afore-mentioned aims fully implemented to empower the youth for sustainable development? No wonder Bush (2006) stated that the capacity of the simple act of teaching a child to read or an adult to read has the capacity to transform nations and yield peace we want. A literacy initiative will help spread prosperity and peace.

Hence, there is direct link between illiteracy and persistent poverty.

In order to be an informed consumer you have to read, to enable you take advantages of job that may come to your country as a result of expanding economic opportunities, you have got to read, in order to become productive worker you have to be able to read the manual. Hence, university education is to enhance capacity to read and encourages prosperity. It is hard to have free societies with empowered youths if the citizens are not provided with functional education that develops the three domains (cognitive, psychomotor and affective).

Some of the reasons radicals are able to recruit young men for example to become armed robbers, assassins and suicide bomber is because of hopelessness. And one way to defeat hopelessness is through functional education which gives people the fantastic hope that comes by being able to read, skilled and realize dreams. Therefore, education that develops the totality of the mind is the new right of all citizens. There is nothing more hopeful, there is no greater gift than to educate a person's three domains. Investing in university education of the citizens helps governments to meet their obligations by improving opportunities for the one of vulnerable group (youths) and their families, by strengthening their economies and by keeping them in good health.

### **Trends of poverty alleviation in Nigeria**

Poverty alleviation in Nigeria has witnessed elaborate poverty alleviation programmes from successive governments. For instance, the first reign of President Olusegun Obasanjo saw the launch of Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) with its focus on increase food production. This was premised on that fact that improved nutrition would enhance healthy living in people. The second republic of President Shehu Shagari witnessed the Green Revolution with focus similar to his predecessor. Though General Buhari who overthrew Shagari did not articulate any specific programme for poverty alleviation, his emphasis was on fighting corruption and inculcating discipline in the citizenry which was expected to have some positive impacts on poverty in the country as corruption and indiscipline remain two major causes of poverty in the country. The most pronounced effort was during the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida (1985 to 1993), it was during this period that the first institutional structures and policy framework for poverty alleviation in the country were put in place.

Among the structures put in place for poverty alleviation were the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) with responsibility for fighting unemployment through provision of opportunity for self-employment for school leavers, People's Bank, National Economic Reconstruction Fund (NERFUND) and Community Banks were all for provision of capital or funding small businesses without stringent collateral requirements. The Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) which was to focus on integrated rural development with emphasis on opening of fresh rural roads for easy contact by rural dwellers with the urban centres, and the National Agricultural Land Development Agency (NALDA) was to focus on cleaning of arable land cultivation. The regime of General Abacha did not record any major poverty reduction efforts as the country enjoyed near total pariah status within the international communities. The spouses of military rulers also contributed to poverty alleviation programme in the country. Mrs. Mariam Babangida came up with Better Life for Rural Dwellers while Mrs. Mariam Abacha designed the Family Support Programme. Apart from complementing the efforts of their spouses, the programmes made attempt to provide for the needs of female gender. Despite the plethora of poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria, Nigerians still remain povertystricken.

It is becoming widely recognized that poverty takes various forms including the lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods, hunger and malnutrition, ill-health, limited or no access to education, homelessness, inadequate housing, unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion. Restrictions on or lack of participation in the decision making process and in civil, social and cultural life could also be termed as part of variables contributing to poverty.

The view mentioned earlier makes one to see poverty as a subjective experience in which education and lifelong learning can play a part. In Nigeria, it seems as if sustainable development refers to the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. However, Nigeria youths seem

to be deprived of their rights in relation to the implementation of poverty reduction programmes on ground. Youths are seen roaming the streets without jobs, creating social menaces in the society.

Most of the poverty alleviation programmes mentioned above died prematurely before the expiration of the president tenure. Today, we are witnessing 7-Point Agenda that had as one of his objectives to empower the youth via skill acquisitions. Loans were given to the youths without knowledge of business or skill acquisition to be repaid. But what Nigerians are witnessing currently is that the hungry youth living on less than a dollar per day seem to have spent the money on feeding and other social aspects of their lives. The question is, “What is the way forward to reduce poverty among the youths?”

### **Concept of youth**

Youth is defined by Webster’s New World Dictionary as “the time of life when one is young especially the period between childhood and maturity of the early period of existence, growth or development.” The word “youth”, “adolescent”, “teenager” and “young person” are often used interchangeably. Youth generally refers to a time of life that is neither childhood nor adulthood but rather somewhere in-between. Youth is an alternative word to the scientifically-oriented adolescent and the common terms of teen and teenager.

### **Age limits**

The age in which a person is considered a youth varies throughout the world; United Nations General Assembly puts the age from 15 to 24; World Bank puts the age from 15 to 24; Commonwealth Youth Programmes puts the age from 15 to 29; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration puts the age from 21 years; Government of Tasmania, 20 to 24; Wilson School District puts the age from 14 to 21. In this paper, ages 15 to 25 are regarded as youths.

## **PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION TO ENHANCE EFFECTIVE POVERTY REDUCTION AMONG THE YOUTH**

If the university system is not performing as expected in the areas of skill acquisition among the undergraduate (youths), what then are the approaches or strategies to be used to make both university education programmes functional to reduce poverty among the youths?

### **Green certification**

Combined literacy education with skill training leads to sustainable development. Focus should be on green certificate which could take place in school environment focusing on cognitive (intellect) and psychomotor (skill training) domains. After the training, graduates may get two certificates; one related to academic achievement and a green certificate, that is, educational agriculture.

Education should be to read, write and provide practical experience. For example, in areas such as Ogotun-Ekiti where mat resource is available, the youths could be taught both the theory and practical aspect of matmaking. This could be exported to other countries. IsanEkiti is noted for clay-making, youth also could be taught both the theory and practical. This will lead to youth economic empowerment.

Poverty alleviation is not just a matter of income increase or economic development. It is quality raising and capacities building. Education geared towards poverty alleviation cannot limit itself to the school environment but must extend its boundaries. University education should be integrated with non-formal ways of learning and

combine regular book learning with practical skill training. Learner-centered methodologies should be put into practice.

### **Bamboo and rattan**

Nigeria as a country with an economy in transition, over 80% of her population especially vulnerable groups (youth and children) live in rural environment where their subsistence depends on the forests and rivers (Omiyale, 2007).

The development, management and utilization of bamboo and rattan in the country if put under university curriculum will turn around youth economies if properly pursued. In this way, it will help to alleviate youth poverty. Bamboo and Rattan are regarded as non-wood forest products. They are seen as free gifts of nature which could be exploited freely at will. Bamboo and rattan are available nearly in all Ekiti State, wasting away. The riverine areas need these bamboo and rattan for construction of buildings; this could be taken there for sale or as exchange for fish products.

Bamboo and rattan exploitation and utilization may yield direct and immediate micro-level benefits to economically advantages of the rural communities and the youths of the nation. Product obtained from bamboo are fencing posts, yam stakes, pots for seedlings, benches and beds in farmhouses, window blinds, pulp for paper, walling in riverine houses, flooring and frames while from rattan products such as chair, table, bookshelf, baby cot, birds, mirror stand, lamp stand, trays, hangers, cooler container, basket, ceiling decoration, photo frames and flower vase could be obtained (Omiyale, 2007).

### **Aquaculture and animal husbandry**

Aquaculture is the farming of aquatic organisms including fish, molluscs, crustaceans and aquatic plants (FAO, 1998). Farming of fish is practiced in ponds within lakes, river, reservoirs in cages positioned along the course of running water and concrete-block tanks made from earth of clayey texture or concrete (Fagbenro, 2002).

Animal husbandry involves the care, cultivation and breeding of animals. Integrating aquaculture and animal husbandry into university education will empower the youths. Combining the two projects enhance the farmers' abilities to fertilize the pond with only minimal effort. Faeces decayed to maggot are used to feed the fish. The poultry and piggery houses should be cited in the vicinity of the fish pond to reduce labor required to transfer the manure to the pond. Integration of agro-forestry into aquaculture increases fish production and high economic profit. Mulberry trees are utilized in cultivating sick warm caterpillars. The silk worm caterpillars feed on the mulberry leaves and produce droppings which help to fertilize the pond. These trees can be planted alongside of the fish pond.

This programme should be embedded in the university courses to develop the youth in providing enough foods for the nation and for economic benefits of the youth. To empower the youth for sustainable development, integrated farming could be located in various parts of the nation. This will serve as an employment opportunity and self-reliant for the youth.

### **Bee-keeping (Apiculture) natural gift/gift of nature**

Apiculture is the act of rearing, breeding and managing honey bee colonies in artificial hives such as traditional and modern beehives for optimum productivity of honey and its bye-products. Training programmes should be put under the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) to provide an awareness of bee-keeping as professional

or vocational jobs which could be a money-spinning venture for the youths. This venture will go a long way in alleviating the fears of unemployment in the minds of the teeming population of fresh graduates (Ogunleye 2007).

### **Property development**

The right to adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living is enriched in many international policies (United Nations Conference on Human Settlement Habitat, 1996). The outcome of the conference constitutes a framework where human settlements development is united to the process of realizing human right in housing (Muhammed, 2007). In Nigeria, can property development approach serves as a tool to poverty reduction among youth?

Property development is to provide accommodation for the person carrying out the development of for someone else. Building development is an important element of poverty itself. Shelter is thus a highly visible dimension of poverty. In Nigeria, successive governments have identified the inter-linkages of housing problems with poverty. Olunubi (2004) estimated that Nigerian housing deficits stand at 8 million units while urban dwellers spend between 40 to 60% of income on rent, hence reducing income and aggravating poverty.

In property development, there are two types of labor wages, skilled and unskilled. The higher the number of buildings constructed annually, the higher in increase of wages both skilled and unskilled and the more youth are engaged. This shows an alternative job-creation and poverty alleviation. Therefore, the government should initiate, create and facilitate an enabling environment for property developments throughout the federation.

Most importantly, technical and vocational training in the university curriculum should be given more attention in the practical areas. The following areas could be embedded under the course, such as road mapping, car wash, sewing, furniture making, and music. These could be sited in various sector of the campus as ventures for the students. Trained experts in the society could also render assistance. Poverty alleviation programme should be embedded in the university curriculum for effectiveness and efficiency.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Education is an investment that pays off anytime anywhere. And in a world of crumbling economies and turbulent times, where investors spend sleepless nights trying to figure out how their stocks are doing, investing in education becomes even more paramount. Therefore, investing in education, governments, corporations, communities, non-governmental organization (NGO) and individuals can help prepare the youths for the challenges ahead. If youths are really the leaders of tomorrow, it is time we started investing in them.

Enhancing youth through science and literacy education with skilled training will reduce poverty and dependability on government for jobs among the youths (Yubo and Xie 2007). In China, the higher education curriculum is geared towards skill acquisition, most especially in agriculture and industrial sectors needs. National Data Bank on wages of labor at building sites should be created and be made mandatory to professionals for increase in spendable income.

There should be a link between the industrial policies and the university curriculum to develop the youths towards skill acquisition of the industrial sector. Hence, Nigerian universities should focus the youth in line with the labor market needs. Entrepreneurial skills which the universities integrated into their programmes should be more practical-oriented rather than cognitive dominated. Students should be exposed to the practical aspect that is skill acquisition for self-reliance. Government should encourage private sector establishment by settling up a special

bank that will be used for disbursement of loan at reduced interest rate to all unemployed graduate to embark on some businesses acquired in the university through entrepreneurial skills.

The Nigerian government should include in its national planning policy, creation of more job opportunities especially in agricultural sector to boost employment and real production in agrarian economy. Using available resources in our locality by the universities would be of great assistance to skill development, for example, Western region dominated with bamboo and rattan, riverine areas for fishing. Trade by barter would come to play, that is exchange of bamboo with fish. Most importantly, poverty alleviation programme should be embedded in the university curriculum for effectiveness and efficiency.

### **CONCLUSION**

Education is the most powerful weapon which a nation can use to change the world. Therefore, the adaptation of functional university education and poverty alleviation programmes are twin brothers that can empower the youths for sustainable development in Nigeria, if properly planned and implemented by the stakeholders concerned.

Education is really the investment a country makes in its future. And if you think about the jobs of the future, you always keep coming back to education as the number one factor that makes a difference. Implicit in this is that, a nation that provides its youth with functional education builds a permanent virile nation of emulation.

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