



Accessibility to and Equal Opportunity for Education for Poverty Reduction in Nigeria: The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) Perspective

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Research Note

Abstract

Prior literature has revealed that access to education and equal opportunity for education, are some of the major steps taken by the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) program to tackle the problem of poverty through the education sector in Nigeria. However, most studies on NEEDS and education have failed to address the effects of education under the program on poverty reduction. As NEEDS is primarily set to achieve poverty reduction in Nigeria, this study, therefore, examines the relationship between the accessibility and equal opportunity for education under the NEEDS and perceived poverty reduction through investigating the educational impacts of NEEDS on poverty reduction.

The paper suggests that for educational policies to serve in reducing poverty, such policies must be implemented in the context of poverty reduction; must involve seasoned teachers and administrators; and must conduct teacher-capability verification to flush out and retrain unqualified teachers. Given adequate infrastructure and funding, and if well adopted, the measures, if employed would bring about self-reliance, self-employment, income generation, and poverty reduction.

Keywords: NEEDS, Poverty Reduction, Access to Education, Equal Opportunity, Education.

1. Introduction

The persistence of poverty amidst many educational policies targeted towards reducing poverty in Nigeria is a clear pointer that something is missing in such programs. Various educational development programmes in Nigeria, such as Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Basic Education (UBE), Education for All (EFA); the Millennium Development Goal (MDG)

number 2¹, as well as the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4² were all implemented in the country with a view to finding lasting solutions to unemployment and poverty through the windows of education. However, poverty is still a great nuisance to the Nigerian economy, posing a serious threat to the development of the country. In compliance with the principles of the MDGs, the Nigerian government initiated the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) in 2004 as a home-grown poverty reduction strategy. In its policy thrusts, the NEEDS has encompassed every sector of the Nigerian economy towards the development strides in order to achieve growth, stability and of course, poverty reduction. Education is one of the major sectors that has been given much emphasis on the NEEDS program.

Over the past decades, development planners have come to realize the role of education in the fight against poverty. Several writers have emphasized the significance of education in poverty reduction under different dimensions (Duarte, Ferrando-Latorre, & Molina, 2018; Khan, 2015; Lupeja & Gubo, 2017; Nasir, Alam, & Alam, 2016; Shimeles & Verdier-Chouchane, 2016; Waldfogel, 2017). The general belief is that education is one of the strongest weapons in the fight against the crutches of poverty. With education, the entire society is enlightened and engaged in productive ventures, which enhance income generation leading to sustainable economic growth and development and consequently, poverty reduction. Huyer and Mitter (2002) report that the objective of poverty reduction had become necessary in the international development initiative during the 1990s when it became clear that the strategies adopted in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s which concentrated on economic liberalization and structural adjustment have all failed to achieve the desired results.

According to The World Bank (2005) report, poverty is viewed in terms of illiteracy, joblessness, lack of shelter, hunger, sickness coupled with an inability to contact a doctor, and child mortality consequent upon consumption of contaminated water, and insecurity for the future, powerlessness, lack of freedom and representation. From this definition, basic spheres of life – food, water, shelter, health, and education – are all included. The endemic nature of poverty in this regard, therefore, consists of illiteracy brought about by a lack of education, which also creates joblessness or unemployment. Aigbokhan (2000) therefore said that comprehensively poverty creates inability and unaffordability to achieve a minimum standard of living. Many of the poor cannot afford a \$1.25 (The World Bank, 2005) a day considered a minimum standard of living (or the international poverty line) regardless of access to education and other basics of life.

Related to this is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2010) Report which states that poverty is a denial of opportunities and choices, which also results in a violation of human dignity. It similarly encompasses lack of basic capacity to contribute effectively in the society due to inadequate resources to have enough to feed or to clothe one's family, coupled with illiteracy and sickness, due to inability to go to school to acquire education or clinic and hospitals to have access to modern health services respectively. An entangled poor cannot,

¹ To ensure that children universally – including both boys and girls – will be able to complete a full course of primary education by 2015

² Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

therefore, have access to education and health which consequently renders him unemployed, sick and malnourished. Societal development is therefore retarded in that regard.

Following suit, the World Bank (2001) Report summarises furthermore the various dimensions of poverty as a lack of security, empowerment, and opportunity. Most poor nations are afflicted with warfare for lack of jobs created by illiteracy and lack of education. In the Report, it was maintained that the windows of opportunities remained closed to the poor masses which renders them inactive in the society. Lack of empowerment and school opportunities make them particularly idle, poor and isolated with limited choices, leading to insecurity, violence, vulnerability to diseases and similar phenomena. Valentine (1968) puts it that the main theme of poverty is the creation of inequality which consequently breeds relative deprivation. Most of the Third World Countries and some African countries are trapped in this circle.

Apart from its multidimensional manifestations, the causes of poverty could be traced to three major factors as reported by some literature. For instance, Grobler and Dunga (2016), and Habibov (2011) outline three major causes of poverty as fatalistic, individualistic and structural. In the fatalistic circumstance, an individual is poor because of fate or bad luck. On the other hand, the individualistic cause is blamed on the individual either due to lack of ability or lose morals. However, the structural cause blames the society, or due to the cultural, political, or economic factors in society. In whatever way poverty is caused, it has been and is still a serious nuisance to the entire world. Many countries have come and are still coming up with different programs and strategies focused on poverty reduction. That is why Nigeria came up with the NEEDS program in 2004 to address the developmental problem (especially poverty) through the channels of education.

Most programs aimed at reducing poverty are dedicated to providing education to the youths which ensures employability, self-reliance and consequent income generation, and which is also believed to be one of the best approaches. However, the condition of our educational systems and the expenses involved in the schooling of a child make the situation even worse for the poor. Evidently, there was the total infrastructural decay of facilities in the education sector (Dode, 2010), as well as under-funding, which brings down the adult literacy rate to 57 percent and raises the pupil-teacher ratio to 41:1 (Aderemi, 2013). With chaotic state in the educational sector in Nigeria even before the NEEDS (Ogundele, Hassan, & Abdul-Azeez, 2011), in addition to the proportion of unqualified academic staff at the tertiary level (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2014), it has become therefore, extremely impossible for education to achieve the set objectives under such a miserable situation (Obisanya, 2014).

Before the implementation of the NEEDS program, it has been observed that Nigeria's education system was decaying rapidly rendering many graduates unemployable; which has severe consequences on unemployment and poverty – leading to youth engaging in social vices (NEEDS Secretariat, 2004). Consequently, a decade after the implementation of NEEDS Abimbola et al. (2014) reported that the program has not really performed well especially in the implementation of the policy thrust on education. However, many factors have contributed to this problem.

The major reason for this unhealthy condition in the education sector, according to USAID/Nigeria (2015) include inadequate investment in the sectorial facilities and infrastructure, poor quality of teaching which results in loss of confidence in the education system, over-crowded classrooms beyond the management and control of the teacher, long distance to school, and the need for parents to have their children at home to work for the family. This is why illiteracy has become widespread in Nigeria, particularly in the rural areas where a greater proportion of the population can neither read nor write (Gyasi, Xi, Owusu-ampomah, & Basil, 2017). Recently, the World Bank (2018) report compares the literacy rates between Nigeria and a neighboring African country (Tanzania) and discovers that among the youth aged 18 to 37, only 19 percent of those who completed primary school in Nigeria could read compared to Tanzania's 80 percent.

In view of the numerous policies to achieve poverty reduction, this paper seeks to stress (through previous literature), the relevance of making education accessible as well as giving every child equal opportunity to benefit from quality education. It is, therefore, the opinion of this paper that if education should achieve its objective of poverty reduction, it must first and foremost be made accessible to all and then accord all and sundry equal opportunity to benefit from its services. This is embedded in the educational policy thrust of the NEEDS. The major objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine the educational impacts of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) on its goal of reducing poverty in Nigeria. The paper seeks to explore the approaches adopted by the NEEDS in providing access to and ensuring equal opportunity for quality education to achieve a desirable educational standard in order to facilitate and enhance the aim of the program in reducing poverty in Nigeria.

Previous researches majorly concentrated on assessing the performance of the NEEDS program on the education sector without making reference to one of its major goals of poverty reduction (Abimbola et al., 2014; Aderemi, 2013; Bambale, 2011; Marcellus, 2009). Through this paper, the effects of NEEDS on education in poverty reduction would add to the literature needed to explore other areas of interest in development planning. Finally, this paper aims to proffer suggestions for future research on educational perspectives within the context of development planning. This paper is presented in five sections from the introduction, literature review, the effects of NEEDS on education, under which we have the educational objectives of the NEEDS program (Access to education and equal opportunity for education), conclusion, and references.

2. A Review of Related Literature

The relationship between poverty and education has been extensively studied by various researches under different circumstances. For instance, Knight, Shi, and Quheng (2007, 2010) observe that there are close and strong relationships between poverty and education in a number of ways. These interactions can create a vicious circle of educational deprivation and poverty. However, if properly handled, education which is considered a factor for human capital and sustainable development enhances the efficiency, value and productivity of labor thereby increasing wages necessary for poverty reduction (Litschig & Morrison, 2013; Maiyo, Amunga, & Ashioya, 2009; Omoniyi, 2013; Roberts, 2003).

Furthermore, Adebayo (2012) suggests that youth-enhancement through a comprehensive school program with professional training could result in poverty reduction among youths. Therefore, if education is considered at reducing poverty, it should not be limited to the conventional cognitive domain only, but also be expanded to vocational and functional education, which will practically and relatively change the lives of many poor.

Poverty reduction is a great role that can be achieved by educational attainment, particularly of the youths and also a positive function of income generation (Faux & Ntembe, 2013; Thapa, 2013; Ukwueze & Nwosu, 2014). Further studies by Nasir, Alam, and Alam (2016) argue that the fact that both poverty and education are interrelated in many aspects, the reduction of poverty can be achieved through imparting productive and effective education, especially by studying education in the context of poverty reduction. This was supported by Hernandez and Napierala (2013) who observe that the educational attainments, particularly of the parents, is an important determinant of the educational outcomes of the children. The authors further argue that parents with low educational levels and attainment (not beyond elementary level), may be limited in the experience and knowledge required to assist children to succeed in schools.

Other studies by Bakhtiari and Meisami (2010), Cremin and Nakabugo (2012), and Thapa (2013) maintain that education is one of the major indices and ingredients of human development, others include health and employment. However, illiteracy, low-quality education, and poverty are the major problems afflicting developing countries. Evidently, the poor quality education received by youths is a major factor that triggers a cycle of poverty from one generation to another (Spaull, 2015).

Similarly, education and health are considered the two most important indicators of human development. The interaction of the two could either be positive or negative, which has the tendency of making them work together. Poverty makes people think that education is a failure, implying that children that are born into poverty are born into a vicious circle of poverty (Mihai, Țițan, & Manea, 2015). When trapped into poverty and its vicious circle, such children try to find exits to the problem. In the end, most of them are thrown into child labor. Poverty is, therefore, the major cause of deprivation of children to education, skills acquisition, and child labor, as such, there is no difference between poverty and educational failure due to close relationships which consequently results in the formation of child labor trap (Sasmal & Guillen, 2015).

Households with educated members and active labor force stand better chances of resisting the threats of poverty and therefore contribute to the reduction of poverty by increasing the efficiency and value of labor (Jayamohan & Kitesa, 2014; Maiyo et al., 2009). The trend increases economic growth which leads to higher income and lowers poverty levels. However, to serve as a poverty reduction tool, policies on education must tackle the issues of inequalities, because poor people would continue to be worse off if they had no access to education (Tarabini, 2010). The poor spend little on education because children in poor households normally attend public schools that do not charge fees with, however, low-quality education (Banerjee & Duflo, 2007). Consequently, due to the poor households' unaffordability for high-quality education for their

children, they have limited economic opportunities through lack of ambition, lack of information, and lack of resources (Knight, Shi, & Quheng, 2010).

According to Cremin and Nakabugo (2012), education is necessary for the growth of any economy and for poverty reduction as it contributes to health gains, lowers fertility, improves infant survival, promotes higher labour productivity, and increases the growth of the GDP, as well as integrating the individual in social, political, and cultural spheres of life. There is no doubt, therefore, that quality education is the acquisition of functional knowledge, skills, and values that are regarded as essential and valuable by society (Spaull, 2015). On the other hand, poor quality education has serious negative consequences on poverty reduction and equality (Wedgwood, 2007). Therefore, Tarabini (2010) suggests that if more and better education is not parallel to more and better jobs, if poor people have no options to take advantage of the educational investment, if only access to school for the poor pupils is guaranteed without substantially altering the school and social conditions under which the schooling process takes place, there is a risk of obtaining a better-educated population that is as poor as before, a population highly disappointed by the impossibility to fulfil the educational promise. In that wise, trying to achieve mass education at the expense of quality will have a negative impact on equality, as argued further by Wedgwood (2007).

Education which is a vital tool in fighting poverty, is regarded as being one of the indices of human development. De Silva (2008) points out that education of the household head, and whether privately or publicly employed, has a significant positive effect on the standard of living of the family. The author further argues that the probability of being poor increases when there is an increase in the size of the family, when the household head is female, when the family is living in the rural area, or when the head of the household is a casual wage earner.

From the empirical perspective, Kurosaki and Khan (2001) report a negative relationship between the level of education and health and poverty. In addition, Sasmal and Guillen (2015) posit that child labor, illiteracy, and poverty are significantly correlated because poverty adversely affects children's education and schooling, leading to persistent poverty and the creation of child labor trap. Child labor is also significantly and negatively related to the literacy rate. Thapa (2013) further established a positive relationship between economic status and mean years of schooling, stressing that the level of education as reflected by mean years of schooling increases as the level of household expenditure increases. He further concludes that while a positive relationship between private school goers and income levels was found, a negative relationship between income levels and public-school goers was found.

On the other hand, education has a significant but positive impact on development by increasing the efficiency and quality of institutions, increasing the productivity resources, creating and rapidly diffusing new technology (Teshome & Nana, 2014). While the study by Faux and Ntembe (2013) reveals that primary education has no impact on poverty reduction, Afzal, Malik, Ishrat, Kafeel and Hina (2012) confirm a bi-directional causality between education and poverty. The above empirical studies attest to the relevance of education in poverty reduction. Low or lack of education is only a trigger as well as an accelerator of the poverty situations of the individuals, causing different dimensions of deprivation.

There are varying dimensions to poverty ranging from social exclusion, low income to unemployment, inadequate housing, environmental degradation to a lack of basic education (Heath, Haines and Smith, 2000). Low enrolment of primary-school-age children in schools coupled with a lack of improvement in the quality of education and unhindered access to education at all school levels was associated with poverty (Abimbola et al., 2014). This makes most leavers, graduates unemployable and hence their persistent poverty status. However, Dunga and Makhalima (2016) argue that poverty in children is derived and inherited from parents and those that bear responsibility for them. In a similar vein, Duarte, Ferrando-Latorre, and Molina (2018) support that the material disadvantages transferred from the poor parents to their children is an important factor in transmitting chronic poverty and inequality among children.

Related to this is the issue of overcoming child poverty, which implies that children should be accorded the opportunity to explore their full potentials first as children by benefiting from all educational and social opportunities, and then as adults to attain their economic and social well-being (Stephens, 2013). Therefore, a sound basic primary education is very necessary for the relevance of higher education and in the effect of education on inequality. Consequently, investing in quality primary education will bring about a reduction in inequality among children and youths (Tchamyou, 2018).

3. The Effects of NEEDS on Education

Although the NEEDS program was not exclusively implemented to address the problems of the education sector in Nigeria, education is, however, one of the major areas through which the program is envisaged to achieve its numerous but diversified goals. According to IMF (2005); Marcellus (2009); and NEEDS Secretariat (2004), the NEEDS program, apart from being a macroeconomic plan document, is also a comprehensive roadmap that would see Nigeria in achieving its goals of value re-orientation, employment generation, wealth creation, and poverty reduction. In this respect, Abimbola et al. (2014) believe that these goals could be achieved through education and this is why NEEDS has to ensure that basically, its goal on education is sustained and unhindered access to education as a veritable mechanism through which poverty could be reduced.

Furthermore, both Abimbola et al. (2014) and National Planning Commission [NPC] (2004) believe that the NEEDS is “Nigeria’s plan for prosperity”, which aims at eradicating poverty and bringing about sustainable development (Anger, 2010), through mobilization of resources, in order to make a fundamental departure from the failures of past programs (Oni & Okanlawon, 2006). In relation to education, Ogundele et al. (2011) lament that the education sector has been in disarray even before the implementation of the NEEDS program. However, Aderemi (2013) believes that the NEEDS has brought about an improvement in educational indicators like adult literacy rate, enrolment of female students in primary schools, and primary and secondary school completion rates.

Iheanacho (2014) believes that some of the problems which affected the success of the past development plans include lack of plan discipline, lack of continuity of such programs,

corruption, lack of commitment, absence of relevant data which leads to over-ambitious plans, and inefficiency on the part of the public service.

3.1. Educational Objectives of NEEDS towards Poverty Reduction

The NEEDS is a program established by the government as a poverty reduction mechanism which was expected to boost and achieve the objectives of the MDGs sponsored by the United Nations (UN) and which ended in 2015 (Abimbola et al., 2014). The NEEDS recognizes education as one of the gateways to the achievement of the set objectives. Aspects of education like access to education and equal opportunity for education, are given prominence in the achievement of the goals of education under the NEEDS program. The relevance of these aspects of education would be discussed, albeit briefly, in the achievement of the NEEDS' educational objectives in poverty reduction, one after the other.

3.1.1 Access to Education

Since education is generally believed to be a veritable weapon in the fight against all forms of deprivation and poverty, access to its services becomes indispensably necessary for human development. As reported by Mitra, Posarac, and Vick (2011), programs that should promote access to education are especially necessary for the well-being of the individual. This is why numerous programs and policies are embarked upon by different countries first to ensure opportunities for, and then, easy access to education by the citizens of the countries concerned (Musa & Isa, 2017). This implies that access to education is an important indicator of equality in educational opportunities, which is important in reducing all forms of inequalities (Dev, 2017). Similarly, increasing access to education, according to Anyanwu (2013) would facilitate the reduction of poverty by enhancing the productivity of the individuals and enabling them to move from low-paying jobs to higher-paying jobs. Therefore, in order to have functional well-being through productive and gainful employment of both the individuals and the communities, which enhances the opportunity to integrate successfully into the society, it becomes necessary to support access to education (Kitiashvili, Abashidze, & Zhvania, 2016).

However, accessibility to education is often determined by wealth status and geographical limitations, as the youth in the rural areas are likely to be excluded (UN, 2009). Rural areas are still inhabited by the poor, where about 900 million of the 1.2 billion are in extreme poverty, with a lack of access to education amongst other basic necessities (Preece & Singh, 2005). Although access to education is adversely affected in rural areas where poverty is highly concentrated (Malaney, 1999), it differs depending on the level of income because poverty is only one-factor affecting access to education (Thapa, 2013). The low-income status of poor households has adverse effects on the educational attainment of their children because of the limitation it poses on educational investments, thus affecting both the quality and quantity of education and creating a kind of poverty trap (Knight, Shi, & Quheng, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010). Investment in education is thus very essential because poverty reduction and subsequent economic growth can be better enhanced through investment in education, educational institutions, access to, and quality of education (Afzal et al., 2012).

Furthermore, Zhang (2014) observes that the cost of basic education, and the disparity therein, contribute a great extent, to lower access to educational attainment among the poor families, which will, in the long run, constitute an obstacle for poor children to access equal educational opportunities. Apart from the costs, children whose parents are suffering from certain illnesses (like HIV or AIDS) are more vulnerable to becoming single or double orphans, and this has serious adverse effects on children's access to education and the income of the household (UN, 2009). On the other hand, IFAD (2016) describes gender discrimination as one of the factors that limit women to access education, especially in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, ICAI (2015) reports that the country has been off-track in pursuing the educational objectives of the MDGs in the areas of universal primary education and elimination of gender disparities in access to education. According to Anugwom (2009), inadequate access to education by the women is responsible for the numerous acts of discrimination which they suffer. Consequently, ICAI (2015) observes that 10 percent of the world's out-of-school children are Nigerians, and about 9 million of this proportion (equivalent to 37 percent of its primary school-age category) were not in school as at 2007 due to economic and social circumstances; the majority of this category are girls.

Related to this, is the report from UN (2016) which indicates that many development indicators reveal that accessibility to education varies greatly across the states and regions in Nigeria, "with a bias against the North and rural areas". In addition to this, the activities of Boko Haram insurgency and consequent displacement of the population have worsened the already-low accessibility levels in education in Northern Nigeria (USAID/Nigeria, 2015). Furthermore, Boko Haram is still a threat to education (especially for women) in Northern Nigeria, which makes the region lag far behind other regions in the country in terms of social transformation (UN, 2016). According to Azalahu, Ngozi, Joseph, Udaw, and Adekunle (2013), owing to the sustained unequal access to education, social opportunities, and employment, Nigeria has not been able to guarantee security, overall growth, and prosperity of the economy.

In the words of Uzoh (2015), Nigeria has been bedeviled by poverty brought about by limited access to education, unemployment, inequalities in wealth and power, monumental corruption and uneven distribution of national resources, which have impacted negatively on youth development. Youth are an important segment of the society who can be difficult to reach and who face challenges such as violence, poverty and lack of access to education (Bradford, 2017). Therefore, coming up with goals that would lead to poverty reduction is an essential measure of the way forward, and improving access to education is essential for achieving this goal (Kanayo, 2015). The improvement in access to education, according to the World Bank (2018) could be monitored by simply looking at the enrolment data.

As a way forward, Fatile and Ejalonibu (2016) suggest that there should be improvement in the education sector through compulsory and free basic education, provision of scholarships, enhancement of adult education to reduce illiteracy, ensure increase in school enrolment at all levels and facilitate the establishment of distance learning to reduce gender inequality in education. Preece and Singh (2005) observe that free education has greatly contributed to the accessibility of education. Similarly, public spending on education, in the form of scholarships,

if targeted to reach the poor can produce a two-sided effect; increasing the chances of the poor children to access education and reducing poverty through the provision of employment which guarantees income generation and exit from the bondage of poverty (Anyanwu, 2013).

3.1.2 Equal Opportunity for Education

Making education accessible does guarantee equality of opportunity to acquire it for different socio-economic and cultural reasons. According to Brown (2006), “opportunity is an agency concept, where this means that agents must do something, must undertake some course of action, in order to make use of their opportunities”. Brown (2006) adds that although the opportunity is not a guarantee because agents must compete for outcomes that everyone can have, it is something more than a mere possibility between an agent and a given goal. According to Bello, Daramola, and Yusuf (2017), every child must be accorded the opportunity to acquire education in accordance with their ability, to enable them to perform their civic responsibilities in the society. However, providing parents with resources necessary to support the education of their children is probably the best measure (Bynner & Joshi, 2002).

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018), more than 262 million children and youth worldwide are out of school for the year ended 2017. This figure includes 64 million primary school-age children, 61 million of junior secondary school age and 138 million of senior secondary age. In Southern Sudan, for example, about 2.2 million children do not have an opportunity for education or are out-of-school, and this is amongst the highest out-of-school rates in the world (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018a).

One of the reasons adduced by Kainuwa, Binti, and Yusuf (2013) to the high rates of out-of-school children are the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of the parents especially in the areas of family income, family background, and activities of the family. Most children found under these circumstances are engaged in child labor for the sustenance and survival of their families. Fiszbein, and Schady (2009) report that “the opportunity costs of schooling are associated with a labor shortage, resources, and services lost due to sending children to school”. According to them, child labor is essential for the continued survival of many households especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) where the majority of children are engaged in domestic works (like fetching water, cooking, and fuel collection), agricultural work, marketing and managing the family business, as well as childcare services.

Similarly, Solomon (1970) reports that equality in educational opportunity begins by looking at circumstances brought about by several inputs in the educational systems in trying to achieve their goals and the sociological factors of the environment. For instance, the pressure on children from a poorer background, in particular, to withdraw from school increases as they get older, particularly as the opportunity cost of their time increases (Kainuwa et al., 2013). This diminishes their opportunity for education and further confines them to child labor. Therefore, to attain equal educational opportunities for even the poor students, different sociological factors affecting the families, which have a direct bearing on the decisions for their children’s education must be brought to the fore (Solomon, 1970).

In Nigeria, the issue of imbalance in educational opportunity has been a dominant one since independence and by different administrations (Nwogu, 2015). It is in view of this that access to

Universal Basic Education (UBE) was given prominence to all children of school age regardless of their gender, social class, ethnicity background or mental and physical abilities (Bello et al., 2017). This development, according to Nwogu (2015) was born out of awareness by the citizens of the relative importance and value of education. However, even with the presence of the UBE program, a lot needs to be done in the area of educational opportunities. For instance, International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2014) reports that as at 2012, there were 564,569 teachers for the UBE program in 59,009 primary schools across the country, consisting of 297,960 male teachers and 266,609 females; 133,338 teachers in Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) with 68,085 male teachers and 65,253 female teachers. With 20,291,709 and 4,313,164 enrollees in both primary school and the JSS, the teacher-to-pupil ratios stand at 1:60 and 1:37 respectively. The attitude of some parents, especially in Northern Nigeria towards the education of female children is another obstacle to equal opportunity for education to the Nigerian children. According to Onoyase (2018), some parents in the North frown at female education on cultural reasons. To achieve equal opportunity for education, and for every child (irrespective of gender) therefore, requires that every child has an equal chance to achieve his goal without any hindrance (Brown, 2006).

4. Access and Equality in Education versus Poverty Reduction

Several studies on the relationship between education and poverty have been conducted under different circumstances. Most empirical studies have revealed an inverse correlation between education and poverty (for example, Kurosaki & Khan, 2001; Sasmal & Guillen, 2015; Tilak, 2002). However, De Silva (2008) reports that education has a significant positive effect on the standard of living (or poverty level) of a household. Other scholars hold the opinion that income generation, which is a gateway to poverty reduction, is the major positive effect of education on poverty (for example, Faux & Ntembe, 2013; Shimeles & Verdier-Chouchane, 2016; Thapa, 2013; Ukwueze & Nwosu, 2014). On the other hand, while Janjua and Kamal (2011) argue that education is the most important contributor to poverty reduction, Afzal et al. (2012) contend that the relationship between poverty and education is bi-directional. But the causal relationship between poverty reduction and education tends to be viewed “in terms of poverty reduction leading to greater access to education rather than education leading to poverty reduction” (Wedgwood, 2005). On the part of Knight et al. (2010a), the evidence that income increases as a result of educational quality are rather weak.

Seen from another perspective, poverty encompasses the lack of access to employment and educational opportunities which lead to pro-poverty livelihood (Igwe, 2016). In this similar vein, Paraschiv (2017) reports that one of the most important indices used in measuring poverty nowadays is the level of education, which is correlated with income level. Therefore, attaining a minimum level of education can produce a substantial reduction in poverty levels (Knight et al., 2010). Similarly, Mohd, Senadjki, and Mansor (2016) affirm that attaining a minimum level of education has the potential of reducing the probability of impoverishment. Therefore, the positive effect of the educational level on poverty reduction, which is found in most development and welfare researches, makes education an important aspect for exploring the nature of multidimensional poverty (Pham & Mukhopadhyaya, 2017). It is in the realization of

this assertion that MDGs identified increasing access to both primary and secondary education as the major priority areas (Mussa, 2017).

According to Ružojčić, Opačić, and Tokić Milaković (2018), although education is an essential protective agent in the crusade against poverty, not all poor youth have equal chances to certain educational level. For many poor youths, the level of skills and education acquired is too low to permit any substantial progress in their living conditions (Agwu & Kadiri, 2014). Low levels of skills and education acquired are associated with low levels of employment, and hence, the danger of perpetual impoverishment. Samuel, Alkire, Zavaleta, Mills, and Hammock (2018) suggest that low attainment in education and employment are especially associated with poverty and isolation. Therefore, tackling the poverty and employment gap in the education system remains the top priority of most development policies (Harris & Jones, 2018); because education is the most important agent of poverty reduction (Janjua & Kamal, 2011).

The relationship between access to education and propensity to reduce poverty has been established by previous researches (Anyanwu, 2013; Dev, 2017; Fatile & Ejalonibu, 2016; Mitra et al., 2011; H. Zhang, 2014). However, a report from the UN (2009) suggests that access to education continues to be unevenly distributed geographically (between the rural and urban areas), but a major factor contributing to this is the distance to school. Apart from distance, the unofficial cost of education and the large disparity in the quality of education particularly at the basic level, remains a serious challenge for poor children to access functional education (H. Zhang, 2014). Hence, poor people will undoubtedly continue to be in an adverse condition if they could not have access to education (Tarabini, 2010). This will lead to perpetual impoverishment because illiteracy perpetuates poverty, which limits or hinders access to education (Mihai et al., 2015); this at the end limits human development (Shohel, 2014).

Furthermore, in the spheres of human development, lack of access to education is exhibited in the denial of the poor the opportunity to participate in the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the society (Tilak, 2002). According to Zhang and Minxia (2006), this reduces an individual as well as national capabilities thereby exacerbating the cycles of poverty. Therefore, while it is acknowledged that poverty is one of the major factors that affect access to education, education is considered to be the most essential determinant of income poverty (Thapa, 2013). On the other hand, lack of access to education, according to Tilak (2002), and a corresponding lack of participation in the system, is the most important factor responsible for perpetual poverty among the poor. In this regard, an equitable system of education, which meets the basic learning needs of all, is not only a basic human right but also a means of promoting productivity, poverty reduction, and sustainable development (Zhang & Minxia, 2006).

Similarly, the opportunity for education equally accounts for the successful educational outcomes (or otherwise) of children in most households, poor or affluence. But children from poor households are more adversely affected. According to Mulford, Kendall, Ewington, Kendall, and Silins (2008), children from poor households have fewer educational opportunities and significantly lower achievement because they attend school less often. However, this assertion is not new. Noguera (2011) points out that recognizing the idea that

poverty has a strong influence on academic performance is not new because children from poor households face serious educational challenges that are related to poverty.

Put in another way, the existence of an opportunity for school children depends on whether or not the children have access to acquiring or doing, which is, of course, determined by the criteria and conditions of access which the children possess (Burbules, Lord, & Sherman, 1982). On the other hand, the extension of opportunity for education could be achieved through the improvement of the quality of learning and teaching, and the widening of the access to education; otherwise, as long as the system of education continues to play a selective role, there must be inequalities in educational outcomes (Brown, 2003). Similarly, the elevated levels of inequality in education caused by a lack of opportunity and poverty considerably and adversely affect an individual's choices in both educational and occupational careers (Tshabangu, 2018).

According to USAID/Nigeria (2015), an unbalanced opportunity to access quality educational services is one of the most challenging issues in Nigeria, making it extremely difficult for poor households to enroll their children in full-time public schools. This is perhaps the reason why Noguera (2011) argues that poverty and the hostile conditions that accompany it, affect both the performances of the school and students. For instance in Nigeria, about 10.5 million children do not receive any formal education; and for those who attend school, the quality of teaching they receive is dismal, which by any standard, does not impart any meaningful knowledge into the poor students (USAID/Nigeria, 2015). In view of this, most poor families usually and cautiously weigh the alternative of engaging their children in the economic activities which assist the family versus sending them to school for several hours in a day in the classrooms (USAID/Nigeria, 2015).

Conversely, it should be realized that it is education that is expected to provide opportunities for the acquisition of skills and knowledge (Aluko, 2003). According to Abimbola et al. (2014), education provides an individual with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes which help him explore the world and manipulate it for his survival and meaningful existence within the society. Similarly, Garba (2010) points out that both education and training empower an individual and assist him to escape poverty through the provision of knowledge and skills which raise his productivity, generate income and accumulate wealth. Therefore, children with successful formal (and informal) education stand better chances of success in both knowledge and skills acquisition and in employment (Wikeley, Bullock, Muschamp, & Ridge, 2009).

The promotion of employment, on the other hand, is better done through formal training and education, with a special focus on technical skills and programs (Gehrke & Hartwig, 2018). However, formal training mechanisms tend to be very expensive for the poor and “need a minimum of contact time for skills to develop” (Gehrke & Hartwig, 2018). A good and affordable education, according to Datzberger (2018), is therefore necessary for developing the skills and finding decent work to be dependable. On the other hand, the skills and knowledge acquired through formal education should be geared toward poverty reduction and change in the attitudes of the individuals (Odame, 2016). According to Ibekwe et al. (2018), poverty reduction programs are expected to meet the present needs of the poor through the

empowerment of necessary skills to enable them to live a satisfying, reliant, and self-sustaining life in the future.

5. Conclusion

Considering the above literature, this paper suggests that before education can serve as a poverty reduction instrument, certain aspects of it must be given adequate attention. These aspects, as explained in the paper, include access to and equal opportunity for, education, (as provided for in the NEEDS document). Firstly, we must consider if poor households have access to education. By this, it means whether educational institutions and infrastructures are within the reach of the poor and are well equipped with qualified personnel. Secondly, accessibility to such educational facilities is not adequate to guarantee to benefit from them; equal opportunity must be granted every child irrespective of gender and socio-economic backgrounds to benefit from such services. For instance, some children from poor households are not given such opportunities by their homes due to poverty.

This hindrance may come in the form of familial obligations (domestic work, family business, etc.), poor health conditions of the parents, poor financial status, and lack of or low educational attainment of the parents. Accessibility to, and equal opportunity for, education prepares the children of poor households to acquire education, skills, and training necessary for social inclusion and poverty reduction.

Thirdly, once these two are guaranteed, the poor child can now possess the opportunity and ability to decide what aspect of education to acquire. Unless these conditions are met, this paper suggests that education may not be able to serve the role of poverty reduction. This informs the reason why this paper sees the two as necessary and basic factors to consider if education is to be used as a poverty reduction machinery. However, this can only happen when the system can readily produce positive and desirable results, given adequate infrastructure and finance (Maina, 2014). There is, therefore, the need for an effective education system in Nigeria devoid of any institutional bottlenecks (Aboluwodi, 2015). The quality of knowledge and skills acquired by the students, and the extent of transferability of same in the labor market, depend greatly on the types of tasks available and the degree of continuity in individual tasks (Gehrke & Hartwig, 2018). It is worthy of mention here that education plays a vital role in promoting social justice and knowledge-based economies around the world (Kitiashvili et al., 2016). Therefore, ensuring quality and functional education would suffice this important role.

With regards to policies, this paper suggests that for the education sector to effectively serve in reducing poverty in Nigeria, all educational policies should be implemented in the context of poverty reduction. This means that students at all levels of education should be trained to be job-creators instead of jobseekers. This will reduce the dependence on government employments which has no guarantee, and which also depends on "who you know". This will equally give the children from poor households the opportunity to discover their worth in the society they live in.

Again, such education policies should involve, in the design and implementation, seasoned education administrators and teachers of known reputable characters. Such a class of people are often found in society and mostly retired. These people also know the wherewithal of most

education policies as they have participated in past programs. Their experiences could be harnessed and applied to the existing programs for better results. They could also be used to monitor the sustained implementation, progress, and evaluation of the existing programs.

Furthermore, this paper suggests that there should be a “teacher-capability” verification exercise to flush out unqualified teachers. Such unqualified teachers should be sent to other institutions of learning to gain more knowledge and experience in the teaching profession. Such type of measure has been adopted by the present Kaduna State governor, El-Rufai, and is yielding fruitful results despite criticisms. According to Ikhide (2017), the governor decided to flush out the unqualified teachers in Kaduna State to pave way for qualified ones who would impact functional knowledge to save the future of the next generation. The continued retention of unqualified teachers can only bring damnation to the country both now and in the future, the reporter added.

The whole world now recognizes the role of education as a factor affecting development, well-being, and quality of life of all citizens and the economic progress of the society (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2018); and therefore, making it extremely difficult for an individual to gain employment without education (Becker-Pestka, 2017). Nevertheless, programs that promote access to education and enhance employment can contribute significantly to raising the standard of living of the poor (Samuel et al., 2018).

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