

## Review

# Roadblocks to the achievement of universal primary education in Africa

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**One of the millennium development goals (MDGs) is the achievement of universal primary education (UPE). It is seen as part of the child's rights and also as a force capable of freeing the child from ignorance, disease, poverty and making him a better human being. Africa is lagging behind in the pursuit of UPE and there are odds (roadblocks) working against its achievement. Such problems have been identified to include lack of adequate planning, poor funding, poor state of physical facilities, the incidence of HIV/AIDS and malaria, absence of research activities to support education, medium of instruction, etc. The first four are discussed in this paper. It is argued that except Africa does something to tackle the problems and achieve UPE, it shall remain a passive observer instead of being an active participant in the new world order.**

**Key words:** Africa, achievement, millennium development goals (MDGs), universal primary education (UPE).

## INTRODUCTION

The millennium development goals (MDGs) came about as a result of the millennium summit in September 2000, when world leaders insisted on development as a global agenda. They adopted the MDGs which set date targets for arresting the decline in average living standards in developing areas. The MDGs include eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education, promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, reduction in child mortality, improvement in maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental stability and development of a global partnership for development. Generally speaking, Nigeria and most African countries are found wanting in each of these goals. The standard of living is generally low and development is sluggish.

In terms of life expectancy, literacy rate, primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, life expectancy index, GDP index and the cumulative human development index (HDI), Africa falls below the world average (Obanya, 2002). The reasons for the low-level performance of Africa on the above indices are not far to seek. Frederick William

de Klerk, the last white president of South Africa, in 2001 identified a number of challenges and problems facing Africa. The study sees them as the factors responsible for Africa's low performance and they include the following:

- i. Many African countries are still wracked by violence and civil war continues unabated in Angola, Congo, Sudan and Kenya. Also, other recent theatres of war like Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda should be remembered.
- ii. Too many African states are still ruled by despotic governments, that have run out of progressive ideas. The likes of President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Paul Biya of Cameroon and Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo who recently transferred power to his son, come to mind.
- iii. Too many African countries continue to be burdened by crippling foreign debts. It was only in the last political dispensation that Nigeria was able to unburden herself by reducing her debt profile from US \$32.92 billion in 2003 to US \$3.63 billion in 2007.
- iv. Prices of many of the continent's primary exports continue to decline; at times Africa finds it difficult to secure fair access to international markets for her agricultural exports. Consequently, Africa accounts for a small percentage of global trade and this attracts a pittance of foreign investment compared with other parts of the world.

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**Table 1.** Africa's performance on selected educational indicators: Basic education level.

S/N	Indicator	1990	1998
1	Gross enrolment in early childhood education	4 million	5 million
2	Gross enrolment in primary education	11 million (46% girls)	15 million 46% girls
3	Gross enrolment ratio primary level	73	75
4	Net enrolment ratio	54	60
5	Out - of - school children	39%	42%
6	Gender parity index	0.84	0.82

Source: Obanya (2002).

v. Africa continues to be afflicted by diseases particularly HIV/AIDS, malaria and other deadly diseases.

vi. Only 76% of African children attend primary school, 50% go on to secondary school; and a paltry 4% make it to the tertiary level of education.

vi. In concluding his analysis, de Klerk (2001), wondered "How, under these circumstances, are we going to be able to compete in a globalizing world?" Africa, no doubt, entered the twenty-first century with a huge "human development deficit" (Obanya, 2002).

The way forward lies in human capital development and the starting point is the primary education which is the foundation. One can therefore understand why the second MDG is the achievement of universal primary education (UPE). Why primary education or basic education as labeled in some literature? Why focus on this level of education? Obanya (2002) advanced four reasons for its importance and why it should claim greater attention. Firstly, basic education, if universalized, broadens the scope of participation. Secondly, returns to investment at this level of education do impact meaningfully on societal development. Thirdly, higher education needs to be built on a solid foundation, that is, basic education being a good path to quality and relevant higher education. Higher education cannot be as high as it should be, if education at the lower levels is not as solid as it ought to be. This paper therefore aims at the following:

1. Reviewing UPE in Africa;
2. Examining the problems (roadblocks) militating against the achievement of UPE; and
3. Suggesting plans for dismantling the roadblocks that is, the way forward.

## REVIEW OF UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Free and compulsory education is desired by most countries of the world and they have been cooperating in putting up legal frameworks to back it. Right from the 1948 universal declaration of human rights, the 1989 convention of the rights of the child, the 1990 World conference on education for all (EFA) (Jomtien, 1990),

the child's right to education has been guaranteed. It must be appreciated that resolution and implementation are two separate facets. African Ministers of Education met in Addis Ababa in 1961 and resolved that, all African countries must achieve UPE by 1980 but no African country was able to achieve this resolve by the target date (Arubayi, 2007). The Education for All 2000 Assessment which examined the EFA performance of various regions of the world has these core indicators for Africa.

Table 1 shows that there have been marginal improvements in early childhood enrolments, enrolment ratios and gender parity. Even though there is marked improvement in primary education enrolment, about 33% of them are unable to reach primary five before dropping out of school (Arubayi, 2007). Table 1 also reveals that, there were more primary school age children out of school in 1998 than was the case in 1990. Africa has primary education enrolment of about 76%, Middle East and North Africa record about 81%; Latin America and the Carribean about 92%; East Asia and the Pacific about 96% (UNICEF, 1999). It is clear that Africa is at the bottom of the world's educational league table and this requires urgent, concerted and innovative responses. African countries have been urged to speed up effort to eradicate illiteracy in their countries, in order to bring development to its people. To this end, 2015 has been set for the achievement of this goal. In 2002, following the review of the progress of EFA objectives, many countries, especially African countries were found to be lagging behind in the achievement of EFA by 2015. The World Bank established the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) designed to spur developing countries on a faster lane in education. Daniel cited Uzoka (2006) examined the readiness of many African countries in achieving the United Nations Millenium Goal through the FTI and arrived at the facts presented (Table 2).

It is clear from Table 2 that only 6 countries are demonstrating seriousness while 34 others may or may not achieve the Dakar Framework for Action. 20 countries including Nigeria are not on the track yet. Africa has to pay critical attention to the education sector. Uzoka (2006) believes that Africa should not be dealing with the present FTI but with a radical programme of "leap flogging" the wide chasm that underdevelopment entails.

**Table 2.** Achieving the Dakar goals: Primary schooling, literacy and gender equality.

High chances to reach the three goals	Risk of not achieving at least one of the goals	Serious risk of not achieving any of the goals
Congo, Gabon, Kenya, Rwanda, Seychelles and Zimbabwe	Botswana, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Togo, Uganda and Tanzania	Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, DR Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Zambia.

Source: Uzoka, (2006). p. 09.

## ROADBLOCKS TO UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

A number of factors appear to be militating against the achievement of UPE in Africa and they have been tagged "roadblocks" in this paper. The problems are many and cannot all be taken in a limited paper as this. This include lack of adequate planning, poor funding, poor state of physical facilities and other educational infrastructures, the physical distance of schools from homes, gender disparity, under-fed children of school age, the incidence of HIV/AIDS and malaria, absence of research activities to support education, medium of instruction, etc. The following are discussed:

### LACK OF ADEQUATE PLANNING

Successful implementation is largely a function of adequate planning and Africa suffers immensely from non-availability of relevant data or falsified ones. As noted by Arubayi (2007), data is required on enrolment, promotion rate, repetition rate, dropouts, withdrawals, per pupil cost, funding, pupil-teacher ratio, attendance rate etc. Even when it comes to school buildings, data on number available, number in use, number dilapidated, number required are either falsified or not available for planning. It becomes more serious when projections are to be made. In 1994, Malawi commenced free primary education programme and enrolment increased to about 80%. Uganda introduced its own in 1997 and enrolment doubled from 2.6 to 5.2 million. Nigeria first launched the UPE in 1976 and later the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999. The UPE led to increased enrolment from 6 million in 1976 to 8.7 million in 1977 and 15 million in 1982.

In Nigeria, instead of the 2.3 million pupils expected when the UPE was launched in 1976, 3 million pupils showed up for registration. This meant about 30% underestimation according to Fafunwa (1984). It was further observed that, when states in Nigeria were asked to submit their proposal for implementing the first year of the Junior Secondary Education, over 50% of the states inflated their figures with more than 300% of the actual cost (Arubayi, 2007). This problem of inadequate

planning due to over or under estimation of data also plagued the UBE. This problem is certainly not limited to Nigeria, only as other African countries are known to have unreliable data. Obanya (2004) asserts that reliable statistical data are a "sine qua non" for planning. Unreliable data can make planning a hazardous exercise and can derail programmes. Detailed strategic planning is recommended by Obanya.

### POOR FUNDING OF EDUCATION

Poor funding is not limited to primary education only; it affects also the secondary and tertiary levels. African governments are yet to give education the primacy it deserves whereas it is a priority in the developed world. Table 3 shows most African countries spend less than 6% of their GNP on education with the exception of Kenya and South Africa. Uzoka (2006) claimed that, the more developed countries spend 6% of their GNP on education. Funding is very crucial to the success of UPE in Africa, as it touches on all aspects of the programme including planning, facilities, equipment, buildings, teachers, and so on. African countries have failed over the years to place education on the front burner and this is due mainly to economic recession, loan payments and expanding population growth. Educational expenditure, as a ratio of total government expenditure, has fallen below the minimum standard of 26% of annual budget between 1970 and 2000 as recommended by UNESCO.

Besides, some African countries give preference to other tiers of education and pay less attention to primary education which is the foundation of education. For example, Nigeria between 1996 and 2002, allocated 68% of total education expenditures to higher education, 14.5% to secondary education and 11.5% to primary education. At the state level, 75% of their education budgets went to secondary education, 19% to higher education and 11% to primary education. This is in line with the reasoning of Ade-Ajayi (2002) that like the fish, rotteness in the educational system started from the head, and it is from the head (that is, higher education) that reform must start. It is also argued that higher education must act as a "catalyst" to stimulate other

**Table 3.** Spending on education as a percentage of GNP for some African countries.

Countries	% of GNP
Angola	4.9
Cote d'Ivoire	5.0
Ghana	4.2
Kenya	6.5
Malawi	5.4
Mozambique	4.1
Nigeria	0.7
South Africa	7.9
Tanzania	3.4
Uganda	2.6

Source: Akpan (2002) p. 71.

levels. This type of reasoning must have led to the least allocation given to primary education. On the other hand, Obanya (2002) had argued vigorously earlier on why primary education should attract greater attention.

### PHYSICAL FACILITIES

This is a major problem in the provision of primary education in Africa. School children may turn up for registration but the physical facilities may not be there. Professor Nicholas Nwagwu in a lecture in 2003 on "Crisis in the Nigerian Education System" identified the inadequacy of infrastructural facilities as one of the crises. According to him, there are students everywhere, but no facilities to accommodate them. There is the dearth of classrooms, libraries, laboratories, workshops, playing fields, chairs, tables, water, electricity, equipment, school vehicles and toilets etc and they militate against the achievement of educational objectives. Obanya (2002) prepared a table showing the quantum of funds required for Nigeria's UBE over a ten-year period (2000 to 2010) and he came up with these details:

1. 60% (58,602) of the existing classrooms are dilapidated.
2. Shortfall of block of classrooms amounted to 20,013,000.
3. Shortfall for furniture is 13,598,643.
4. Instructional materials will gulp about N46 billion.
5. Information and communication technology (ICT) will require a total of N11.1 billion.
6. There is a shortfall of 42,809 school libraries and will require N128.4 billion to establish them.
7. Textbooks and curriculum materials will consume about N77.4 billion naira annually.

In other words, a whopping sum of three trillion, five hundred and four billion, seven hundred and forty-nine

million, five hundred and thirty-two thousand, four hundred and twenty naira (N3,504,749,532,420) will be required to fund UBE in the ten-year period. This includes other sub-heads like training, staff emolument, administrative cost and management capacity building. Achimugu (2006) advised that national governments in Africa should allocate at least 26% of their annual budgets and 15% of their GDP to education as recommended by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in order to make funds available for the running of schools. This study believes this is one major way of providing effectively for UPE in Africa.

### THE SCOURGE OF HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is having a devastating effect on African children and this has implications for the achievement of UPE. Over 90% of all Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) orphans live in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS and WHO, 1998). These bodies also claim that 83% of deaths attributable to HIV/AIDS occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, 6% in Asia, 5% in Latin America/Caribbean and others 6%. It is clear that Africa is the region for HIV/AIDS. Table 4 shows the distribution of AIDS orphans in some African countries.

These orphans, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), risk never completing basic schooling. Many may never be opportune again to enroll and unfortunately the number of orphans is increasing because of the low-level awareness. Countries like Malawi and Uganda are providing support for orphans but not all African governments have such policies. Pursuing vigorously the MDGs is a worthwhile venture or else life may remain bleak for many Africans living in Sub-Sahara Africa. According to Arubayi (2007), there is a strong relationship between the health of a child and academic performance; health and adequate nutrition are pillars of learning throughout life. The health of parents and that of their children are crucial factors in the success of educational programmes.

### CONCLUSION

Education is an essential human right, a force for change and the most vital element in combating poverty. It is the path towards international peace and security. These are the views of Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations in the foreword to the UNICEF (1999) document. Africa and the entire civilized world believe in the powers of education. The starting point is primary education and one of the MDGs is on UPE. It is the right of the child to receive primary education, so as to be free from ignorance, disease, poverty and to become a better human being. The factors that militate against successful implementation of UPE have been identified and four

**Table 4.** AIDS orphans in eight African countries.

<b>Country</b>	<b>Cumulative total (1997)</b>
Burkina Faso	200,000
Congo, Democratic Republic	410,000
Ethiopia	840,000
Kenya	440,000
Malawi	360,000
Tanzania	730,000
Uganda	1,700,000
Zimbabwe	450,000

Source: UNICEF (1999) p. 34.

have been discussed briefly. African governments have to pay attention to the problems identified or else they shall remain passive observers instead of being active participants in the new world order.

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