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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY REDUCTION IN POST COVID NIGERIA

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Abstract

Poverty and inequality reduction lies at the peak of the global development challenges and as a result, efforts are being put in place by state and non-state actors to combat this phenomenon. Literature shows that Nigeria was among countries that showed tens of millions more people living in absolute poverty in 2005 (headcount at 33million) than in 1981 (headcount at 88 million); and with a poverty ratio of 47.2% in 1981 and 62.4% in 2005. And as a result of the rise in poverty headcount, Nigeria had a toxic combination of low growth in GDP per capita (0.7 percent per year), and a rise in consumption inequality. Likewise, Nigeria's inequality rate has always been disheartening, data reveals that it worsened between 2004 and 2013 but improved in 2016. In 2018, out of 178 countries studied by United Nations Human Development Index, Nigeria occupies 156th position, placing her at the bottom of the HDI ranking for that year. This paper therefore critically analyses poverty and inequality in Nigeria, taking into consideration the reasons for the constant rise in Nigeria's poverty and Inequality figures. The paper further outlines the benefits of Vocational Education in the development of societies. Finally, the paper recommends improvement in Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) system as it would help to combat poverty and inequality in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Development, Inequality, Nigeria, Poverty, Technical and Vocational Education.*

Introduction

The global village is majorly characterised by technical and scientific innovations which gives rise to transformation and continuous modernisation. These innovations can be achieved through a better system of Technical and Vocational Education (TVE). Poverty and inequality reduction lies at the core of the global development challenge and as a result, efforts are being put in place by state and non-state actors to combat this phenomenon.

According to UNDP (2016), the pursuit of the eight Millennium Development Goals has contributed to remarkable gains in human development over the past two decades. This is evident in reduction in extreme poverty, access to primary education and health, and this progress enabled people across the world to improve their lives and future prospects. Yet, despite these significant gains, extreme poverty remains a key challenge, with more than 700 million people globally living on less than US$ 1.90 PPP (purchasing power parity) per day, while inequalities are either high or widening, especially within countries. Accordingly, World Bank holds that poverty rate is determined by $1.25 a day income of an individual, sadly, even though it has been observed that the poverty rate in countries south of

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the Sahara (Sub-Saharan Africa) has been gradually reducing, poverty rate in most of the countries is still alarming. In 2005 the rate was 54.5%, this drooped in 2010 to 46.9% and further reduced to 39.3% in 2015. However, despite this evident reduction in poverty rate, poverty remains one of the major challenges facing many countries in this region. Between 1981 and 2005, most African countries recorded increases in poverty headcount ratios. Nigeria was among those that showed tens of millions more people living in absolute poverty in 2005 (headcount at 33million) than in 1981 (headcount at 88 million); and with a poverty ratio of 47.2% in 1981 and 62.4% in 2005 (Hillebrand, 2011). As a result of the rise in poverty headcount, Nigeria had a toxic combination of low growth in GDP per capita (0.7 percent per year), and a rise in consumption inequality (the Gini coefficient rose from 0.387 to 0.429). However, the population of people living in poverty between 2005-2015 reduced by 6.6%, but then it was estimated that the country with the largest number of people living in poverty after 2015 would be Nigeria and China (Chandy & Gertz, 2011).

The increase in poverty and inequality rate in Sub-Saharan Africa has been a subject of major concern in global discus. In 2015, the leaders of 193 governments promised to reduce inequality under Goal 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is because, without reducing inequality, meeting SDG to eliminate poverty will be impossible (OXFAM, 2018). Not surprising, Nigeria is among the countries that have been doing very badly overall, and showing a lack of commitment to closing the inequality gap. Nigeria also has very negative results in reducing her inequality index, with the poverty headcount rising by almost 54 million people and the poverty ratio rising from 18 to 62.4 percent, thus, increasing her inequality rates (Hillebrand, 2011).

Nigeria's inequality rate has always been disheartening, it worsened between 2004 and 2013 but improved in 2016. The country's inequality as measured by the Gini worsened from 0.356 (2004) to 0.41 (2013), but improves to 0.391 in 2016. Using Thiel, inequality worsened from 0.217 in 2003 but improved to 0.31 in 2016 (NBS, 2018a). Currently, Nigeria remains at the bottom of the CRI Index (Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index); failing the poorest people, despite its president (President Muhammadu Buhari) claiming to care about inequality (OXFAM, 2018). CRI index measures government efforts in three policy areas or 'pillars': social spending, taxation and labour and Nigerian statistics in these areas are very poor. Out of 157 countries studied, Nigeria occupies 157th position, placing her at the bottom of the ranking in 2018. Specifically taking 157th position in spending on health, education and social protection; 104th position in progressive tax policy; and 133rd position in labour rights and minimum wages (OXFAM, 2018).

Conceptual Clarification

Vocational Education (VE): This is any form of education by which an individual gains experiences and learns to carry out any successful and useful occupation (Okoro, 2006). VE develops an individuals psychomotor, cognitive and affective skills, so that they can take their rightful place in the society (Olabiyi, Okafor & Bamidele, 2014). It is a system of education, which is predicated upon the teaching of skills and also demanding the professional or expert use of hands (Uwaifo, 2009). Therefore, Vocational Education is a practical form of education that equip students with skills in one or more trade or craft.

Technical Education: This is a post-secondary vocational training programme whose primary purpose is to produce self-reliant technicians who are technical driven with affective skill in different occupations (Olabiyi, Okafor & Bamidele, 2014). Technical education emphasises the understanding of basic principles of science and mathematics and their practical applications; delivered at (usually) upper secondary and lower tertiary levels to prepare students for occupations that are classified above the skilled crafts, but below the scientific or engineering professions (Tripney et al, 2012). It is a form of education which at least in part has special reference to the actual or prospective occupation of the student (Musgrave, 1964). Technical education can therefore be said to be a theoretical and practical system of education which provide students with specific skills in the field of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).

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Technical and Vocational Education (TVE): This is a form of education that is comprehensive, referring to those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life (Federal Ministry of Education, 2000). TVE is the process of teaching individuals the systematic skills, knowledge and attitude that are involved in the production of specific products or services; which incorporates the total learning experiences offered in educational settings and abilities to make matured judgments and be in a position to create goods and services in the area of business education, industrial technical education, computer education, home economics education, agricultural education and fine and applied arts education (Olabiyi, Okafor & Bamidele, 2014). Therefore, TVE prepares people to work in a given vocation or talent, either as technicians or skilled craftpersons, tradepersons or artisans.

Reasons for the Constant rise in Nigeria's Poverty and Inequality figures

According to OXFAM (2018), the high rate of poverty and inequality in Nigeria has been attributed to poor delivery of universal, public and free health and education, increasing progressive taxation and clamping down on exemptions. This paper posits that among other factors, it is a fact that constant rise in the rate of unemployment and underemployment in Nigeria, poor human capital development agenda, poor technical and vocational education practice, etc., have significantly contributed to the continuous increase in poverty and inequality rate in Nigeria. These factors have gravely militated the achievement of a constant reduction in Nigeria's poverty and inequality gap.

*** Unemployment:** A major socio-economic challenge facing Nigeria is that of unemployment which is compounded by rapid growth of the working-age population (ILO, 2017). The number of the country's economically active population has gradually been on the increase; from 105.2million in 2015, and 108.59million in 2016 to 175million in 2017. While the country's labour force population rose from 76.9 million and 81.15million in 2015 and 2016 respectively, to 86.9 million in 2017 (NBS, 2018c). The unemployment rate in Nigeria has constantly been rising, the total rate of unemployment in Nigeria stood at 10.4% (2015), 14.2% (2016), and 20.4% (2017) respectively (NBS, 2018c). Alarmingly, Nigeria's unemployment rate came in at 27.1 percent in the second quarter of 2020. This high figure can also be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic that led to massive loss of jobs across Nigeria.

Most of the labour force population in Nigeria are youths and statistics reveal that the youth population, ages 15 – 34, constitutes about a third of the Nigerian population; with a gender distribution of 51.6% for female and 48.4% for male (NBS, 2016). In 2015, the rate of youth unemployment was 14.46% which rose to 19.39% in 2016 and 26.58% in 2017 respectively (NBS, 2018c). Latest data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020) reveals Nigeria's unemployment rate as at the second quarter of 2020 is 27.1% indicating that about 21,764,614 (21.7 million) Nigerians remain unemployed. The data also revealed that while Nigeria's underemployment rate is at 28.6%, the worst-hit unemployed are Nigerian youths with over 13.9 million currently unemployed.

Unemployment has led to socio-economic and political crises in the country. As a result of youth unemployment, there is a high level of poverty in the country. It is a fact that poverty reduction lies at the core of the global development challenge and as a result, efforts are being put in place by state and non-state actors to combat this phenomenon. As shown by the most recent statistics on poverty distribution, Nigeria's poverty rate by zone was as follows: Northwest 45.2%, Northeast 44.0%, North-Central 41.0%, Southeast 38%, South-South 39% and Southwest 38% (NBS, 2018a).

Moving on, due to unemployment, the crime rate in Nigeria drastically increases per annum. Available data shows that in 2016, the total number of cases reported was 125,790, which rose to 134,663 in 2017 (NBS, 2017). Due to the high rate of unemployment, there have been increased number of reported cases on offence against persons and

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offence against properties. These two cases are among the four categories of crimes reported in Nigeria. Every year, graduates are produced and this massive population of graduates produced yearly are in most cases unemployable or not productive. As shown by International Labour Organization, in 2016, the lack of productive opportunities for youth and adults alike means that 247 million people were in vulnerable employment in the countries south of the Sahara, equivalent to around 68 per cent of all those with jobs (ILO, 2017). Hence, the need to provide sufficient productive opportunities for young people.

The government and youths are responsible for the rate of unemployment in Nigeria but the government has the bulk of the blame for the high level of youth unemployment in the country. The government has in one way or the other, contributed to the major course of youth unemployment in the country. It is a fact that efforts have been made by the government to address the issue of unemployment in the country and this has been seen in the introduction of federal and state skills acquisition programmes. The Industrial Training Fund (ITF) have also been involved in skills acquisition trainings in all states of the federation. There have also been the availability of loans available to interested entrepreneurs provided by Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Bank of Industry (BOI), and Bank of Agriculture (BOA). However, these programmes on tackling unemployment have always focussed on providing skills and funds for youths who intend to go into entrepreneurship.

These past projects do not take into consideration, how to improve labour employability and mobility (for those who want to go into corporate world). The outcome of these past projects is that there is a huge number of youths with skills and this is affecting the market demand. This is because a good number of these empowered youths can produce most of the things they need; thus no need to patronise another person with similar skill. While the number of youths with vocational skills keep increasing, the number of employable youths in the corporate world keep reducing.

Poor Human Capital Development agenda: Human Development Index (HDI) among other things, revolves around strong education sector and practical positive educational policies. Technical and vocational education/training and capacity management/building is a way through which education can contribute to the improvement of a country's HDI. Hence, most countries are concerned about how to continuously increase their Human Development Index (HDI) through better education policy formulations and reforms. Resultantly, HDI values have been rising across all regions but the rates vary significantly. South Asia have been currently seen as the fastest growing region in 2017, at 45.3 percent, followed by East Asia and the Pacific at 41.8 percent and Sub-Saharan Africa (Countries south of the Sahara) at 34.9 percent (UNDP, 2018). However, Sub-Saharan Africa went from the second slowest growing region on the HDI in the 1990s to the fastest growing between 2000 and 2010 (UNDP, 2018).

Unfortunately, despite this positive development in Africa's HDI, Nigeria is faced with low Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Gross National Product (GNP), Per Capita Income, and Human Development Index (HDI). HDI considers the average achievements in three basic dimensions of human development; a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living (NBS, 2018b). Nigeria's Human Capital Index and HDI in 2015, 2016 and 2017 were 47.43%, 48.86%, 51.06% and 0.527, 0.530, and 0.532 respectively. This has continuously maintained a slow rise from 0.443 that was seen in 2003. Despite the gradual rise, Nigeria remains among the countries classified under low HDI, being the 156th country out of 178 countries presented in the 2018 HDI study (UNDP, 2018). One of the major reasons why there seem to be a slow rise in Nigeria's HDI is as a result of low rate of manpower development all other things being equal. This is because Human Capital Development involves activities that produce and strengthen knowledge and skills as well as values that are embodied in individuals which could be utilised in the development of a society (UNDP, 2018).

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Maximising Technical and Vocational Education: The Way Forward

Technical education has been credited to have the ability to provide the capacity and skills needed in a technical and scientific environment. Hence, an improvement in the teaching skills of technical college teachers would eventually lead to an improvement in human capital development which would ultimately lead to economic growth and development. Asian countries and other developed countries have an economy strongly hinged on the development of industrialisation processes with a high level of growth in vocational education (Ihuoma, 2018). This is seen in countries like China, Japan, Singapore and Korea and this increased employment opportunities and the manpower or human capital of these countries. However, despite the important role that TVE had maintained in the past in many parts of the world, there is still lack of funding from the government, as well as a lack of adequate monitoring and management. As a result of this, there has been a collapse or malfunction of many technical colleges in the developing countries, most especially in Nigeria.

A permanent solution to poverty and inequality reduction cannot be proffered but with the initiation of some innovative moves, its rate can be reduced. To this end, there is a need to increase Nigeria's human capital through the development and sustenance of the country's Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) system. This will provide avenue through which education can be utilised towards achieving sustainable development in Nigeria as well as improving the skills of the future labour force of the country. This is necessary because "while changes in human capital and labour quality matter most for endogenous growth, it is the level of human development that determines a nation's sustainable growth path" (Noor, 2015). Thus, TVE "develops a skilled, committed and motivated workforce that understands how global changes impact upon local opportunities for business and industry and how these changes impact the quality of local social, economic and environmental conditions" (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2009). Nigeria can improve the employability of her youths through her TVE by:

* Encouraging Capacity Building of Technical Teachers
* Encouraging collaboration between technical academic institutions and government technical agencies like the Industrial Training Fund (ITF) and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE); and
* Provision of technical learning Equipment
* Making emphasis on the use of qualified technical staff;
* Increased value placed on TVE in Nigeria by Nigerians

Capacity Building of Technical Teachers: Technical institutions need to actively and effectively partner with government technical agencies to train their staff. Nigerian government has made some efforts towards the development of the country's human capital and this has paid off in the slow but continuous increase in the country's human capital development and Human Development Index (HDI). With regards to capacity building as well as TVE, Nigeria has focussed most of its past projects on providing skills acquisition to youths. Where this move has led to an increase in the number of youths (graduates of secondary and tertiary institutions) with technical and vocational skills, the quality of students produced by the technical colleges keeps going down.

Through the establishment of the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), technical colleges are been collectively administered. NBTE has been involved in the capacity building of youths in Nigeria. Some of the capacity development projects include a sensitization programme for polytechnics and similar tertiary institutions on the deployment of e-Learning skills, including the Moodle Learning platform and the New and Emerging Flexible Technologies. There is also the Nigerian Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) formerly National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF); National Skills Qualification (NSQ) and National Occupational Standards (NOS); all organised by National Board for Technical Education (NBTE). Irrespective of the above

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capacity-building projects, NBTE needs to strengthen its efforts towards capital development by rigorously engaging in teachers' training projects. This training would involve practical training of technical college teachers in order to equip them with the current global trend which would eventually manifest in the quality of students they graduate.

Collaboration with the Industrial Training Fund (ITF): As research and study in TVE continuous to expand, very little have been written on examining the roles played by other institutions rather than regular education institutions and boards, whose major interest is on the development of human resource and public manpower through technical and vocational training in a less formal or academic style. One of such institution is the Industrial Training Fund (ITF), whose efforts is geared towards the development of the country through Technical and vocational training among other things. Through the activities of the ITF, human capital has slowly improved thus contributing to poverty reduction. ITF has provisions for skills/capacity-building courses/workshops for those in TVE, but technical colleges barely utilise them. ITF is a pacesetter and as a foremost human resource development, established with the statutory responsibility of manpower training and development in general which would promote and encourage the acquisition of skills in industry and commerce, with a view to generating a pool of indigenous trained manpower sufficient to meet the needs of the economy (ITF, 2011). NBTE can partner with the Industrial Training Fund (ITF) in training both the teachers and students. ITF has provisions for skills/capacity-building courses/workshops for those in TVE but unfortunately, technical colleges barely utilise them. A yearly "Train the Trainee (TTT)" project carried out in technical colleges, championed by NBTE in collaboration with ITF would positively affect the output of technical colleges in Nigeria.

Provision of Technical Learning Equipment: The government of Nigeria needs to understand that it is not just about establishing schools but to equip them with adequate facilities to produce graduates that would be useful in society at large. Educational institutions should be able to solve or provide solutions for societal challenges and not to pour out students who are only interested in acquiring certificates. They should take adequate interest in funding technical institutions because they would be equipping technical institutions to produce skilled manpower needed to drive innovations in the country. The government can strengthen or improve the sustenance of the use of adequate learning equipment in technical schools by setting up a technical college observation/monitoring team which would ensure that the fund made available to technical institutions are well utilised. It is also this team that would see to it that technical institutions maintain an adequate technical learning environment.

Also, the Nigerian technical institutions should also realise that they are not just there to graduate students but to graduate those who have been certified in technical skills. To this, they need to adequately ensure that they have adequate facilities to carry out technical learning and that they are repaired when they get damaged.

Emphasis on the use of Qualified Technical Staff: A very significant threat to the development of TVE in Nigeria is the lack of professional skilled technical staff in the colleges to take up practical classes in different skills/trades. As a result of this, trainers are drawn from the public and most of these trainers are those that acquired their skills through apprenticeship training. Most times, as a result of the lack of upgraded equipment, these trainers are presented with outdated machines and this limits the acquirement of new technological up-to-date skills by the students who rely on what a trainer who might have learned his skills some ten to twenty years back has to offer. It could be said that if the Polytechnics are made more polytechnic in nature with the necessary equipment to skilfully and academically train her graduates, the technical colleges in the country will not be starved of adequate academic staff that would keep the TVE system alive at the secondary level.

Increased value placed on TVE in Nigeria by Nigerians: There is a need for a heated orientation at the national level across schools on the importance of TVE. Pupils in primary school need to be sensitised and enlightened that technical colleges have no lesser value when compared with conventional secondary schools. Rather it is a place

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for further development of skills and a place to acquire skills. Most parents feel that technical colleges are places where a less smart or intelligent child could go to acquire an O'Level certificate. As a result of this, the technical colleges are filled with students who feel that they are there just to acquire skills and not to pass other subjects attached to the curriculum.

Often, the value placed on TVE in Nigeria is a very significant factor in the reduction in the number of people willing to go into TVE. But with this new orientation, pupils students, and parents would know or be reminded that technical and vocational activities have led to industrial development in many developed countries. And that it is usually from the institutes of TVE learning that labour force that occupies the practical industrial sector is derived from; thus leading to the division of labour and specialisation in the labour market. It is important to note at this point that the evolution of technology is marked by waves of innovation.

> Each wave has brought science and technology to new heights, with direct though uneven implications for production and potentially for the standard of living…Independent of its specific historical context, each innovation wave starts with some early adopters of new technologies transforming older production processes and gaining an early competitive advantage. As new technologies spread and become mainstream, the knowledge base widens through new and higher learning that fosters the emergence of a workforce with more sophisticated skills (Marope et al, 2015)

This evolution is highly driven by the TVE sector. Sadly, the development of TVE in Nigeria has been seen to be a challenge in which successive government regimes have either neglected or shown little attention. The education sector has contributed to the industrial and manpower development of many advanced countries, yet to be fully utilised in the development of the country. Many developed countries have increased their HDI rate through TVE which was made possible through strengthening their TVE system. Hence, the importance of TVE and its value need to be further emphasised, especially in primary schools so that potential students are not lost to literary education sectors (regular education sector).

Conclusion

The IMF has given clear advice on the importance of tackling inequality, referring to Nigeria's score in the CRI Index (IMF 2018). As the global village continues to make efforts towards reducing poverty and inequality rates, there is the need constantly work towards fighting poverty and inequality at the national and individual level. There is also the need to work towards advancing the implementation of sustainable development goals of the United Nations by engaging in transformative and innovative activities. Consequently, there is the need to pursue poverty eradication projects and research in Nigeria as well as to work towards improving the standard of living of Nigeria's, bridging the inequality gap and eradicating poverty. Education needs to be efficiently and adequately managed through the introduction and modification of education policies which would solve societal problems in Nigeria. When these are taken into consideration, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country would drastically improve; thus pivoting Nigeria into an admirable position in the international economic community. This work has stressed the need for the development of TVE in Nigeria also pointed out that the sector has been drastically challenged evident in the constant nonchalant attitude of government. This education sector that has contributed to the industrial and manpower development of many advanced countries, is yet to be fully utilised in the development of Nigeria. However, it is still not late to reconsider and restart Technical and Vocational Education system in Nigeria with the aim of achieving sustainable development, even with the rampaging effect of COVID 19 on Nigeria's development plans.

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