

Primary Education as a Foundation for Sustainable Development: A Nigerian North Central Perspective

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Abstract

The paper explores the intersection of primary education and sustainable development in North Central, Nigeria and highlighting the collective impact on shaping the region's future. North Central Nigeria is a region characterized by diverse ethnic groups and a complex political landscape. The region faces unique challenges that often influence policy direction and economic development as well as socio-economic and educational disparities are prevalent, thus, the need to provide access to quality primary education becomes paramount for fostering equitable development. The paper highlights the interplay between education and poverty alleviation, gender equality, health improvements, and community empowerment. It also identifies barriers such as inadequate funding, cultural and religious factors, insecurity and conflict, lack of awareness and limited access to resources that hinder the effective delivery of primary education in North Central Nigeria. This paper also examines the impact of some educational reform, religious schools and community-based school on primary education. The paper argues that prioritizing primary education in North Central Nigeria is not just an investment in individual futures but also in the sustainable progress of the entire region and offers recommendations for policy makers and stakeholder committed in transforming primary education as a corner stone for sustainable development in North Central Nigeria.

Keywords: Educational Development, Primary Education, Sustainable Development

Introduction

The relationship between education and sustainable development is paramount in current world debate. While the former is an imperative of human progress, the latter is a critical imperative for ensuring that there will be an adequately equitable and environmentally responsible future. In the case of North Central Nigeria, the connection between primary education and sustainable development is particularly salient. It is a socio-culturally diverse region burdened with a host of challenges and thus provides an ideal prism through which to discuss the interaction of these two critical domains.

According to United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2020). Primary education lays the foundation in individual and societal development. It gives an individual the knowledge, competencies, and values necessary for him or her to become a useful member of society and thus to begin contributing toward the larger development equation. Primary education is even more important in North Central Nigeria, given the historical and contemporary challenges characteristic of poverty, insecurity, religious

belief, gender disparity, Almajiri syndrome and with wide educational imbalance compared to other regions. To this end, investment in primary education will lay a solid foundation on which the policymakers and development practitioners can build a realm of sustainable development in the region.

World Bank (2019) pointed out that sustainable development is a system approach toward development in attempts to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Sustainable Development is measured in three dimensions the economic, social, and environmental these are interconnected. Because of this fact, sustainable development in North Central Nigeria is very necessary for dealing with burning issues such as educational imbalance in the region, resource depletion, adaptive to change and social inequality. This is where the region can strive for both a better quality of life for its citizens and preserve the natural environment for future generations and promoting sustainable practices and policies.

On one hand, primary education may support sustainable development by equipping people with knowledge and skills that would prepare them for the adoption of sustainable practices and participation in decision-making. Examples could involve how primary education can enhance social awareness, promote adaptability, efficiency, economic and political development. On the other hand, sustainable development could have a very conducive environment where quality education infrastructures are available to all, where child labor and early marriage are avoided, and gender equity prevails. International Institute for Sustainable Development (2021), pointed out that primary education plays a crucial role in driving sustainable development in terms of economic growth, improved health and nutrition, environmental sustainability, social equity and gender equity and also strengthen democratic institution. Thus, it is worthy to note that education serves as a powerful catalyst for sustainable development in the North Central especially in equipping individuals with knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively in the workforce. A well-educated population contributes to economic and growth and development.

Lotz-Sisitks *et al.* (2015) in his theory-based framework attempts to capture Education for Sustainable Development in terms of the underlying pedagogy and the change process identified during policy making and its implementation at all levels of education of a nation. Slijper *et al.* (2022) opined that the ability of change relates to the ability to adapt to a new form of knowledge and the capacity to learn which translate understanding into learning outcome. Thus, primary education is the foundation for future learning and plays a pivotal role in shaping the lives of individuals and communities. Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain these intricate relationships within economic growth, social progress, and sustainable development amongst which is the Human Capital Theory propounded by Theodore Schultz (1961) his core idea is the fact that Education is seen as an investment in human capital, similar to investing in physical capital. Educated individuals possess greater skills, knowledge, and productivity, leading to higher wages and economic growth.

Another, theory is the Social Capital Theory propounded by James Coleman (1988) whose core ideal is Education can foster social capital, which refers to the networks of relationships, trust, and cooperation within a community. Strong social capital can enhance economic opportunities, promote social cohesion, and contribute to sustainable development. United Nation (2015) pointed out that education empowers individuals to participate in decision-making, promote sustainable practices, and contribute to a just and equitable society. According to United Nations Children Educational Funds (2017) pointed out that primary education in North Central Nigeria has gone through rather tortuous times. At the colonial era, this level of education was largely confined to the aristocracy and missionaries. After independence, however, several efforts were made toward expanding education into many forms of primary schools. Despite these advances, most of such schools still suffer from infrastructural setbacks, teacher shortages, and socio-cultural barriers that strongly impede access to a quality education system. Prospects for basic education in North Central Nigeria are mixed; on one hand, it can be observed that over the last couple of years, there are enhancing enrolments and an introduction of free primary education. On the other hand, certain setbacks still persist, such as the out-of-school children, challenges of teacher quality, and lack of resources.

Challenges of Primary Education in North Central, Nigeria

The North Central region in Nigeria comprises of state like Plateau, Benue, Niger, Nasarawa, Kogi, Kwara and the Federal Capital Abuja. The region is characterized by a rich tapestry of ethnicities, language and religious affiliations where its diversity is seen as a mixture of variety, balance and disparity. Adeyemi and Adediran (2016) pointed out that Primary education in the North Central Nigeria faces significant challenges which includes the following:

Poverty and Economic Disparity: Many families struggle to afford school fees, uniforms, and other educational expenses, child labor is mostly attributed to poverty which compel children to engage in child labor, preventing them from attending school. In addition, in this region, a lot of children are yet to be enrolled in school, partly because of abject poverty, cultural reasons, or conflict. In such situations, targeted specific interventions become necessary.

Insecurity and Conflict: Conflicts and insecurity often lead to displacement, disrupting education. The north central Nigeria witnessed series of attacks on school by bandit kidnapping school children leading to the closure and damages to school, in some part they have converted a school as their camp while preparing other attacks. The region has been plagued by security issues, which have disrupted education and displaced communities. Insecurity has made it difficult for schools to operate and has forced many children to abandon their studies. This has led to long periods of out-of-school time and difficulties in accessing educational services in new locations.

Cultural and Religious Barriers: Cultural and religious practices in some parts of North Central Nigeria often require girls to marry at a young age, preventing them from

completing primary education. This is especially prevalent in rural areas where early marriage is seen as a traditional norm. In some vain, some religious extreme often advocate the age of marriage for a girls child should not exceed 12 years, thus, in some areas of the North central Nigeria this extremism hinders access to education particularly for girl. While in some other parts of North central Nigeria rampant very early pregnancies of children which is often not frown at by the cultural practice increase the rate of drop out. (UNICEF, 2017).

Gender Inequality: Discrimination against the girl child prevent girls from accessing primary education. This can be due to cultural norms that prioritize the education of boys or the lack of adequate sanitation facilities for girls. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021) viewed this stereotype about the roles of girls and women limit their educational aspirations. These stereotypes may discourage girls from pursuing education or limit their career choices.

Lack of Awareness of the Importance of Education: Some communities may not fully understand the importance of education for their children's future, thereby believing on the child laboring as a better option to education. This is especially prevalent in rural areas where children are involved in agricultural activities or other forms of labor to supplement family income.

Teacher quality: The most significant impact on primary education effectiveness will be brought about by enhancing the quality of the teachers. This will be achieved by providing them with improved quality training, professional development, and adequate remuneration. There may also be a shortage of qualified teachers particularly in rural areas coupled with the low morale of teachers as a result of low salaries, poor working conditions, and lack of professional development opportunities.

Poor Infrastructure: Many schools in North Central Nigeria lack basic amenities such as classrooms, textbooks, and sanitary facilities. This creates a hostile learning environment and hinders students' ability to concentrate and learn effectively. Infrastructure in many schools, infrastructure such as classrooms, textbooks, and facilities is still inadequate. There is, therefore, a need to invest in infrastructure development to ensure that lOearning environments become conducive.

Underfunding: Despite the positive intentions behind many educational reforms, inadequate funding has hindered their implementation. Insufficient resources have led to challenges in building new schools, providing adequate infrastructure, and paying teacher salaries.

These challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, cultural and religious barriers that promote early marriage can exacerbate gender inequality by limiting girls' educational opportunities. Similarly, gender inequality can reinforce cultural and religious practices that discriminate against girls. Cultural and religious barriers, and gender inequality pose significant challenges to primary education in North

Central Nigeria. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that involves promoting gender equality, challenging harmful cultural and religious practices, and investing in education infrastructure and human resources. By addressing these challenges, it is possible to create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment for all children in the region.

The Impact of Primary Education on Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction in North Central Nigeria

Primary education plays a crucial role in driving economic growth and reducing poverty in North Central Nigeria. By equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge, primary education can enhance their productivity, increase their earning potential, and contribute to the overall development of the region. Institute for Statistics (2021) pointed out that Primary education provides individuals with the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed to participate effectively in the workforce. This increased productivity can lead to higher wages and greater economic output.

World Bank (2018) viewed that education can foster entrepreneurship and innovation by equipping individuals with the problem-solving and critical thinking skills necessary to start and run businesses. This can contribute to economic growth and job creation. Thus, a good primary education lays the foundations for the acquiring of these skills. Economic growth and poverty reduction are interconnected. As the economy grows, more jobs are created, and income levels rise. This can lead to poverty reduction and improved living standards. Conversely, poverty reduction can stimulate economic growth by increasing the purchasing power of individuals and households.

In another dimension of gender equality, Education can empower women by providing them with the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in society. Educated women are more likely to have greater economic opportunities and to be able to make informed decisions about their lives than the uneducated ones. It also reduces gender-based violence by challenging harmful gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality. Educated women are more likely to be aware of their rights and to be able to seek protection from violence.

The intersection of primary education to sustainable development economic development, environmental sustainability, improved health & nutrition, good governance and social equity. Primary education also plays a vital role in driving economic growth and reducing poverty in North Central Nigeria. By investing in primary education, governments and communities can equip individuals with the skills and knowledge they need to participate in the workforce, contribute to economic development, and improve their living standards, promote good governance, democracy, social equity, and gender equality, reduce inequality and to some extent reduce gender-based violence. In summary, primary education is a fundamental building block for sustainable development. By investing in primary education, countries can promote

economic growth, reduce poverty, improve health, protect the environment, enhance social equity, and strengthen democratic institutions.

Educational Policy Reforms in Nigeria: Impact on Primary Education

Nigeria has witnessed numerous educational reforms over the years, aiming to improve the quality and accessibility of education, particularly at the primary level. However, the impact of these reforms has been mixed, with some leading to positive outcomes while others have faced challenges. However, positive impact of some educational reforms includes;

Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act: Enacted in 1999, the UBE Act mandated free and compulsory education for all children aged 6-15. This initiative has led to a significant increase in enrollment rates at the primary level, especially in rural areas and most part of the North Central Nigeria. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) the UBE Act transferred the sole responsibility of the basic education on the State and Local Government. More so, the federal government intervenes by providing the consolidated revenue funds which is the main source of funds for the UBE programme. Halilu (2022) posit that the UBE act was a reform educational policy targeted to better the standards of basic education.

National Policy on Education (2004): The National Policy on Education revised 2004 provides a framework for educational development in Nigeria. It outlines the goals, objectives, and strategies for improving education, at the primary level. With goals of providing free and compulsory primary education for all children aged 6-11, to lay a solid foundation for future learning and development, to contribute to the development of human capital and national economic growth and to promote social and moral development among children.

In addition, it also outlines the objectives of primary education as to ensure that all primary school leavers can read, write, and count, to equip children with the knowledge and skills necessary for further learning and life. It also designed to inculcate positive attitudes towards learning, work, and society and lastly to promote physical and health development among children.

Curriculum Review: Periodic reviews of the primary school curriculum have aimed to make it more relevant to the needs of students and the country. These reviews have focused on incorporating practical skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities into the curriculum. National Commission for Colleges of Education (2012). Aimed the revised National Policy on Education (NPE) was to ascertain the relevance of the learning contents and its conformity to societal requirement.

The National Policy on Education Revised (2004) provides a clear roadmap for improving primary education in Nigeria. By implementing these goals and objectives, the government aims to ensure that all children have access to quality education and are

equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in life. On the other hand, the negative impact of some of the reform policies are witnessed in the underfunding nature of primary education which has the ripple effect in availabilities of facilities and lack of teaching and learning resources, quality issues and teachers shortage e,t,c

In the same vain, an examination of some of the reform policies it show a great impact exerted my religious and community on primary education in the North Central Nigeria in the areas of increased access to primary schools by establishing school where they are limited or even non -existence, cultural relevance where school incorporate cultural and religious values into their curriculum, making education more relevant and engaging for students and some even provide alternative educational approaches where school may even offer alternative educational approaches that can complement the government-run system, providing students with a wider range of options. Thus, religious and community schools play a significant role in the primary education landscape of North Central Nigeria. These schools often complement the government-run education system, providing alternative options for educating children, especially in rural areas. This shows the impact of these schools on primary education in the region, considering the context of educational reforms and policies.

Summarily, while educational reforms in Nigeria have had some positive effects on primary education, several challenges remain. Addressing these challenges requires sustained government commitment, increased funding, and effective implementation of policies. By addressing these issues, Nigeria can ensure that all children have access to quality primary education and are equipped to contribute to the country's development. To this regard this paper show cased that primary education is synonymous to sustainable development, if educational reform policies are comprehensively implemented. The paper also pointed out the deep understanding of the complex relationship between primary education and sustainable development in North Central Nigeria.

Suggestions/ Way forward

The paper provides insights, strategies for improving primary education in such a manner that it can promote sustainable development in the region. The paper offers the following suggestions:

Expansion to increase access to primary education through the establishment of new schools, especially in underserved areas, with establishment of new schools it will cater for the increased enrolment rate since the enactment of the educational reform act of UBE.

Teacher Development that will improve the quality of primary education teachers through training, professional development, and adequate remuneration. Government, religious and community should join in proving scholarship for teachers to go for further training. Offer ongoing professional development opportunities to keep teachers updated on the latest developments in sustainable development education

To reviewed Curriculum and update the primary education curriculum to make it more relevant and effective so that appropriate skills that will enhance economic development are inculcated in the children. Incorporate sustainable development themes, such as environmental conservation, climate change, and renewable energy, into the primary education curriculum.

Funds should be made available and ensured that they are used for infrastructure development to provide adequate infrastructure, such as classrooms, textbooks, and laboratories, in primary schools. Ensure that primary schools are built using sustainable materials and incorporate energy-efficient technologies. Provide access to clean water and sanitation facilities in all primary schools to promote health and hygiene.

Community should be involved in the planning, implementation, monitoring and supervision of primary education programs. Comparatively, this is what is obtainable in Ghana in their quest to improve the quality of education of the country. Collaborate with local communities to identify and address their specific sustainable development needs. Integrate community-based learning activities into the primary education curriculum, such as environmental clean-ups, tree planting, and community service projects e.t.c

To promote gender equality in primary education by ensuring equal access and opportunities for girls and boys, in region with high rate of disparity, girls should be encouraged by providing a scholarship programs similar to the Girl Education Program (GEP) championed by UNICEF. To provide appropriate education for children with special needs.

To incorporate vocational skills, such as agriculture, renewable energy, and entrepreneurship, into the primary education curriculum, and also collaborate with vocational training institutions to provide students with opportunities for hands-on learning and skills development.

Conclusions

Based on the discourse of this paper it clearly pointed out that primary education is not merely a means to acquire knowledge and skills but also a powerful tool for promoting sustainable development and the intersection of primary education and sustainable development is particularly significant. As such the paper propose a policy intervention to strengthen primary education to support sustainable development goals in North Central Nigeria by increasing funding of education, encourage religious and community participation, enhance the curriculum to accommodate vocational training in to the primary education curriculum and government need to increase funding for education, improved teacher training, curriculum reform, and community engagement

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