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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

Abbass, I.M., PhD

Department of Political Science, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

Abstract

Communities are strategic in a variety of ways towards the provision and management of education as well as teaching, learning and enforcement processes. However, communities play a variety of roles in the enhancement of democratic practice and stability. This paper discusses how communities can be involved in the promotion and management of education as well as the development of the capacity of communities to assume increased role in handling the entire education environments towards enhanced funding, management and monitoring under democratic settings. Method used in this study is the content analysis of community and democratic participation in various forms and dimensions in order to show the challenges and prospects in the Nigerian setting. Results in the study indicate that community participation in education and democratic participation must be inherently connected to each other for stable polity and good governance, as well as expansion of educational and other services. It is recommended that partnership and interaction between community and government in education must be built to provide initiative, responsibility, sensitivity for participation in education and governance designed to prevent break in communication and breakdown of law and order.

Keywords: Communities, Education, Nigeria

Education in Crises

With the deplorable situation in education in Nigeria, majority members of the community must be deeply touched by the current gloomy future. The multidimensional crises in the Nigerian educational sector are very serious areas of the failures of government to the community in all ramifications. The crises emerged not due to lack of material and human resources, but primarily from how these resources have been managed or mismanaged at the detriment of the larger members of the community.

Hence, serious abuses, in the educational sector, by government bureaucrats and politicians have assumed some of the greatest crimes committed to humanity. Since the nature and dimension of the educational crises in Nigeria are deep rooted and as such cannot be immediately quantified, the issue leaves one to conclude with the aphorism that ‘the more you see, the less you understand’ on why the situation defies all solutions or strategies adopted.

Public schools in Nigeria have degenerated beyond limits in terms of physical structures, infrastructure, and the commitment or quality of teachers as well as the concern of authorities in ensuring standard and achievement of objectives. Thus, conditions for teaching and learning in public schools have completely deteriorated or even collapsed beyond redemption. Public schools have turned out to be a big liability to the Nigeria educational system as they have been indeed transformed into conduit pipes through which bureaucrats and politicians have systematically siphoned public resources.

The greatest tragedy is that government efforts in education are not enough in meeting the needs and aspirations of Nigerians. All these have invariably resulted in the quantitative and qualitative collapse of productive educational pursuits and achievements. Hence, the number of pupils and students turned out yearly is ill prepared for higher education or productive challenges right from the primary to university levels. In other words, performance indicators at all levels of the Nigerian educational system have dwindled (Abbass and Babajo, 2003).

When the Universal Primary Education (UPE) was launched in 1976, for example, there was no adequate plan to achieve the enshrined objectives in all respects and at all levels. These include the projected number of pupils/students, number of schools/classrooms needed, the number and quality of teachers required and other infrastructures and instructional materials. While the UPE was meant to be universal, free and compulsory, it practically did not become free, universal or compulsory, in spite of the government is public pronouncement and enormous expenditure appropriated. Not all these brought about positive results to the greater community members.

Government’s insensitivity to education is, largely, responsible for the crises. The challenge, therefore, is that, there is the need to have a fundamental reform or shift in the bureaucratic and political behaviour in order to have focused, sincere and committed governance with a view to solving such educational crises finally. In the absence of such a fundamental reform, there should evolve determined community efforts designed to ameliorate the situation. Hence, spirited communities, within the confines of their operations

should be inspired to address the foreseeable dangers in the interest of the community and to save education.

The Challenge of Community Participation

The roles communities play in the provision and management of education can not be over emphasized. More often than not, communities sustainably intervene in the learning processes of the entire educational system in terms of financial contributions designed to support schools, teachers and students/pupils. Communities however, establish and fund schools for the general good. This aspect increasingly strengthens the communities' capacity, sense of identity and purpose. The efficacy of community participation in education is potential in bringing members from all specifications and diversities together for the attainment of a common objective. In addition, community participation in education brings about stability amongst community members thereby throwing the entire environment to social, economic and political harmony with enhanced relationships.

With widespread quality education in the community, enhanced social capital amongst members of the community will be guaranteed. This therefore provides sustainable and greater opportunities and hope for all now and in the future. In addition, this enhances desirable change, greater participation with no group left out. Self sufficiency in education and other services enhance political stability with unconditional and active participation. For a community to support education and governance, they must be encouraged in order to achieve these multiple objectives.

Communities, through Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or other institutions should not be undermined but encouraged and supported. They should always be directly engaged in education specifically designed to promote quality education accessible to all members; irrespective of social status. This is aimed at minimizing conflicts and designed to promote the value of education for all community members. International organizations may however be allowed to intervene periodically by supporting local institutions with ideas, finance and organization among others but not to develop into "parallel bureaucracies" (World Bank, 2005; 39).

Community participation cannot be effective and efficient without mass mobilization. In addition, clear objectives of the nature and scope of mass mobilization must be outlined and understood by participating communities. However, there must be guaranteed stability, safety and security safeguards to protect and assure the mobilized communities of the

dividend of participation. Condition of life for members of the community, particularly the teachers, should be continuously improved especially in capacity building that enhances labour mobility. The responsibility to own, provide and maintain education by community members must be guaranteed and sustained.

Resources mobilisation by communities may be in a variety of forms (financial, expertise, labour etc.). Poor communities may not be able to contribute substantial finance or expertise, but their abundant labour may be effectively and readily available to be mobilized. These community resources have great impacts on community sustainability, motivation, learning processes and the entire educational system. The mobilization of the community may be effectively undertaken by different groups, especially Parent Teachers Associations (PTAs).

Community Participation: Forms and Dimensions.

There are many forms and dimensions of participation and its nature is that it could manifest in any field of human endeavour like education. Participation could be transitive, moral, free and spontaneous or otherwise as the case may be. The transitive forms of participation are oriented and designed towards achieving specific objectives. However, participation acquires a moral form or desirable perspective without any evil or malicious ends.

Free participation, opposed to forced participation ensures willingness in partaking in operations that are of paramount interest to the community, rather than being forcefully dragged. Tele-guided or manipulated forms of participation, as opposed to spontaneous participation, make the participating community feel inspired, led or directed outside their mental control by government.

During the late 1950s, the concept of ‘participation’ in governance or with other organs/institutions featured prominently in all development programmes including education. Thus, the failures of the government programmes were attributed to the fact that communities were excluded from the designs, formulations and implementations processes. In order to achieve the desired objectives, there should be a bottom-up or top-down approach to incorporate the community in participatory programmes.

Lack of community participation has; therefore, led to project failures to achieve the desired results with new and increasing problems added without the old ones being solved. The system floundered because communities were not involved in the forms and dimensions

of participatory education. Had the community been involved and actively participated in projects, much would have been achieved with much less. Therefore, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other spirited groups can bring about fundamental changes in the relationship between government and other stakeholders in the educational and other developmental pursuits.

Hence, in order to achieve more with less, government must adopt participation and participatory methods in governance as a basic policy direction in order to have focus, purpose and relevance. Excessive dependence, centralization and concentration of policy or authority bring about non-participatory planning. It should be noted that social conditions for community participation must always ensure the beneficiary's participation in a number of ways.

In the first place, it must be conceived that people or members of the community are not 'the problem' and bureaucrats/politicians are not 'the solutions'. More often than not, bureaucrats/politicians are the problems, while the people are the solutions. Secondly, the nature and extent of the desired community participation must be unambiguous and acceptable to all stakeholders, right from its initial commencement with clear-cut and achievable objectives. Furthermore, there must be clear and acceptable road map with designs or plans for shared responsibilities at all stages of implementation. Finally, adequate financial commitment and disbursement enshrined with explicit checks and balances must be provided to ensure popular community participation.

Merits of Community Participation in Democracy

Given that democracy is the *"government of the people by the people and for the people,"* the concept of community participation has, over time, been adopted as a strategic policy by progressive and democratic governments. In the first place, community participation has been transformed as a political slogan. As an attractive political option, government must appreciate the value of participation and how to politically make use of it in the best interest of governance and in league with the community. Participatory devices by government are likely to create feelings of complicity between government and the community. Therefore, politicians should exploit these situations in order to give their constituencies a sigh of relief and the impression that they are really sensitive to people's plights. This is possible and realistic because *'peacefully negotiated forms of participations*

can take the hit out of many situations where development policies create tension and resistance on the part of their victims” (Sachs, 1997:118).

As an instrument of great inspiration to the community and political effectiveness, community participation provides insight into local activity and reality, which bureaucrats and politicians do not possess. This is because community participation enables the establishment of a network of great and variable ideas and relationships for the government and the community to coexist as well as to make sustained policies succeed satisfactorily.

Not only has participation become a politically designed approach but at the same time an economically attractive proposition. For example, funding and benchmarking must be designed to bring into focus the popular participation of the community in education through investment in the provision of infrastructure, during either economic recession or buoyancy. Government may, for example, transfer certain costs in education funding to the community if only there is trust, understanding and harmony between them. Therefore, the community closely links the long-term sustainability of education projects to the active and informed participation it partakes with the government. The collapse of the UPE in Nigeria could be explained to the fact that there was no community participation in the programme. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme is equally heading for collapse because of these non-participatory approaches with community inherent in it. Community participation is no doubt an extraordinarily powerful political and economic policy based tool that has come of age but not effectively utilized to move education out of its present quagmire.

Community participation is no longer a threat to politicians and bureaucrats, provided it is transitive, institutionalized, orderly, morally and freely organized. Therefore, sincere, open and democratic governments, interested in effective community progress, with a desire to achieve more with less, adopt the participatory approach to accomplish the purpose of government. This is in consonance with the desire to strengthen the local communities and modernize national aspirations and needs.

All participatory approaches and strategies are therefore designed to, among others; provide basic infrastructure requirements of education as well as the social and cultural needs of the communities who willingly partake/participate in such designed activities. These empower the communities and make governments legitimately relevant and purposeful everywhere, especially in Nigeria’s desperate quest to bring about orderly and democratic participation.

Again, sound and people-oriented education policies tend to create popular and spontaneous support with induced and addictive need to have a strong public or community

participation right from policy-making and implementation as well as how decisions are reached to secure mass community support for government and its programmes. Clever governments, therefore, use communities in a very sophisticated fashion in order to establish control and loyalty over the people. This can only be achieved when governments are not afraid or scared by the outcomes of people's participation in their programmes.

As community participation keeps the economy alive and the polity responsive to the community, it should be emphasized that government collaborating with communities or NGOs automatically guarantees government good image or reputation, because such participatory activities or programmes involve less bureaucratized approaches and zero-free corrupt practices. This device will invariably bring about the meeting of the needs of the community with greater efficiency, satisfaction and at less cost. Thus, governments and NGOs should seek to demonstrate keen ability and trust to work together in a participatory fashion with a view to meeting people's aspirations or needs.

Government must therefore tilt or bend towards the participatory winds of progress rather than remain sunk within the quicksand of sinking education services so that the current and continuing apathy and protests by the Nigerian people will reduce or even cease. NGOs involved in education development like the Zaria Education Development Association (ZEDA) have expressed readiness to partner with government at all levels to assist in providing services to the community against the private lobbyists who lure bureaucrats and politicians in wasting taxpayers money on education without dividends.

Education and Democratic Participation

Education is a designed act in the transmission of knowledge, information and understanding. This act in itself makes education a fundamental right to everybody. Therefore, the right to education has provided the individual the opportunity to be empowered and to control the course of his or her life and be respected with dignity. With education, the individual acquires all other rights because it is considered as a precondition for the exercise of all other human rights. In other words, civil and political rights assume relevance, form and substance only when a person is educated.

Since education enhances social mobility and freedom of individuals from discrimination based on social status, it equally raises community's sense of reasoning and productiveness. As other social and economic parameters are promoted through education, it shows that an educated community has greater opportunities for its members to secure jobs

and fulfill other obligations of life. This therefore enables the community to acquire the right or privilege to adequate standard of living for its members with greater access to skills and knowledge needed to productively participate in community and national development. These, no doubt, contribute in accelerating the unity of purpose, which, therefore, demand that government must make education productively accessible to all, so that no one is directly or indirectly denied the right to education.

There are many connections between education and democratic participation by community members, particularly with regard to the expansion of democratic participation on the one hand and expansion of education on the other (MacEwan, 1999:186). For education to have value or relevance and serve the objectives of the community, it must be organized in a way that it generates widespread participation amongst its stakeholders. Since education is a primary prerequisite for democratic processes and movements, its relevance is therefore based on the degree of the expansion of democratic participation, which favours the expansion of education.

In other words, education offers and expands an essential entry point as well as a route to the sharing of political power. This means that greater equality in education offers a solid base for democratic power through popular community participation, which also enables the widespread of education within the community. Hence, the ability of the community to effectively participate in democratic process is dependent upon the knowledge, information and understanding its members possess, which is equally dependent on the degree of equality in income distribution in the society as well as the degree of equality in the distribution of education in the community.

Community participation in education, particularly in a democratic system, is very important for the polity as well as for the economy. Since education enhances economic growth, and therefore plays a crucial role in economic strategy, it buttresses that monopoly of education brings about monopoly of power in all its manifestations. The official and predominant structure of Nigerian education system breeds certain implications for the strengthening of the community. Public schools, within the Nigerian education system, provide avenues through which socialization processes take place, particularly in the development of patriotic citizenry as well as inculcating the right values essential for social cohesion and unity amongst various communities.

Schools, therefore, form the core contents of the socialization process and thus constitute significant elements in defining the community. Hence, because schools create bonds or connections amongst people through common and shared values, they nonetheless

establish links through the set of knowledge imparted and other forms of social practices put in place. Another vital form of the school-community relations is the extent to which community members are directly involved in the governance of the schools. Thus, when students' parents and other members of the community take active roles in the various aspects of the school's operations, the standard and quality of education is likely to significantly improve. These roles may include anything from curriculum planning to hiring and firing of teachers, to fund-raising and planning of the schools social activities.

One of the most fundamental issues bordering on participation is the nature, form and substance of integration approaches or devices the schools adopt with the community. For example, are the schools drawing their students and strength from the immediate geographical surroundings or from a larger area? Whatever the case may be, the schools are expected to be integrated with the community on either platform. In essence, the impact of schools on the community will largely depend on the strengthening of the community based on the established bonds, as well as on how the schools system are organized and the degree to which they are organically integrated with the community needs and aspirations.

Such integrations will also improve the standard, quality and image of the school partly because the parents and other members of the community have in-depth knowledge and understanding of the problems and needs of the schools as well as the ability of the students, which they all collectively and willingly bring into the schools as additional values. Not all these, no doubt, facilitate the work of the teachers and administrators in ways that are more significant. Such integrations and connections between the school and the community create an emotional bond and involuntary reflexes amongst students who feel involved about the school as theirs and to protect the institution as their own. This sense of 'ownership' provides the motivating factor for scholarship and competitions amongst students, which invariably enhances education and promotes the community.

School-community connections must be vigorously pursued and developed in order to significantly improve the schools as well as strengthen the community that also ensures that other elements in the participatory approaches and democratic development strategy are all combined together for the enhancement of education through community participation. Since direct community participation in education builds integral and sustainable linkages, which at the same time strengthens democratic practices, the community invariably exercises power through participation, which leads to easy accessibility to education, economic growth and popular support for the government.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For communities to effectively participate in education, a feasibility study should be conducted amongst relevant communities in order to understand how their common and diverse interests can strengthen partnership in education for the general good. This also goes on to determine the nature and perspectives of learning or educational activities in the communities, support services and the nature of involvement. There is however the need to identify community leadership and organizations (religious, political, tribal, ethnic, and commercial) and how all these can bring about harmony and acceptable leadership. These local Community-Based Associations (CBOs) are essential ingredients in partaking educational management programmes, particularly in monitoring and evaluation, planning, instructions, supervision etc.

Another vital area for effective community participation in education and enhancement of democratic practice in Nigeria is to strengthen local community education alliances like the PTAs, School Management Boards, School Community Committees etc. The processes of elections/selection of officials are essential in democratic transparency and representation as well as assigning roles and responsibilities. However, in order to ensure quality and effective delivery of educational services, standards must be set for the community with key indicators specifically outlined. These should include, among others, local community-based plan of action, community participation in the design of educational outcomes or responses, methods of evaluation and assessment of the evaluation and assessment of the education programme, identification of crucial training needs of education recipients and providers; particularly the learners' involvement in the education activities.

Community initiative along with government sensitivity and responsibility to education are vital to community participation in education. The continued marginalization of the community by government, through bureaucrats and politicians, by the gimmick promises to provide education should motivate the community to press or agitate for a policy shift. Government should therefore co-opt or adopt participatory alliances, as an institutionalized policy, in league with community development associations (CDAs) in order to save education from further crises and decay.

Hence, the type of interactions that should ensure community-government league in education are designed to prevent further escalation of the breakdown of law and order with a view to giving new scenaria for enhanced grassroots participation so as to generate people's satisfaction in all spheres of human endeavours. In essence, community participation in

education must remove all obstacles that hinder access to education by giving the community opportunity and indeed the right to actively and directly participate in all facets of educational activities. This reflects the fact that expanded education brings greater democratic power to the community, which equally generates equality and in turn provides a foundation for justice, equity and fairness amongst all spectrum of humanity.

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