



ISSN: 2321-8819 (Online) 2348-7186 (Print) Impact Factor: 1.498 Vol. 7, Issue 1, January, 2019

Bias against Vocational Education in Nigeria and Poverty: Perspective on Northern Region

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Abstract: *Unemployment and poverty are problems that Nigeria has been struggling to address. Vocational education is a source of consolation in solving these economic ills. It is a form of education whose primary purpose is to prepare beneficiaries for employment in specific occupations. The terms technical and vocational education are sometimes used interchangeably. Vocational education prepares its beneficiaries for self-reliance through self-employment and reduces unemployment and poverty through skills acquisition that creates potential entrepreneurs and or employees and therefore, eases the transition from school to work while supplying employers with trained workers. Regrettably, despite all the derivable social, political and economic benefits of vocational education to our lives and economic sustainable development, Nigeria has exerted undue significance on general studies that are based on colonial educational system that is devoid of employable skills. Using secondary data this paper showcases the Nigeria's bias against vocational education and identified unemployment, religious soldiering, drug addiction and political thuggery as some of the negative consequences of the bias and neglecting vocational education. The paper recommends aggressive campaign to combat the misconception about vocational education; adequate funding; and reviving the vocational secondary school system among others.*

Key words; *Poverty, vocational education, religious soldiering, political thuggery.*

1. Introduction

Unemployment and poverty are Siamese twins that the world has been struggling to address. The level of these economic havocs differs from one country to another depending on the level of development of such countries. Vocational education is a source of consolation for nations in trying to solve these economic ills. According to Okoye and Arimonu (2016) vocational education connotes designed skill based programs meant for skills acquisition at lower level of education (mostly, junior and senior secondary levels) which focus on specific vocations for entry into defined workplace. The term technical education is sometimes used in place of vocational education. Put differently, they are often used interchangeably.

Vocational education is an indispensable tool for individuals' wellbeing and nations' economic prosperity. A country that imbibes and emphasizes on vocational education is at advantage of reducing youth unemployment as it produces people with certified skills that are not only relevant to but needed by the labour market. Vocational education prepares its beneficiaries for self-reliance through self-employment and reduces the pressure on the government to generate jobs for its citizens. It equips its recipients with skill that made them potential entrepreneurs and or employees (Chinwe, & Ezeabasili, 2014). This allows them to earn income with which to afford assortment of goods and services; enhance their welfare and increase economic activities and development of their communities. This shows that vocational education eases the transition from school to work while supplying employers with trained workers. Regrettably, despite all the numerous derivable benefits of vocational education to our social, political and economic life, Nigeria is not only indifferent to the sorry state of vocational education but has also exerted undue significance on general studies that are based on colonial educational system which are devoid of employable skills. This is attested by the motive of that system of education which was to provide middle cadre workforce for the administrative function of the imperial government (Braji & Yusuf, 2008). On this issue pointed by Braji and Yusuf, Ma'aji (2013) highlighted that the colonial educational system produced graduates who obtained certificates without skills and as citizens they are unfit to hold position of trust and responsibility and failed to be (true) leaders of their community. In fact, even the few Nigerians who were sent to London and trained in technical skills, the objective was still purely for the imperial economical endeavor (Ma'aji, 2013). This system of education which we accept and blindly acclimatize is one of the major contributing factors that produce the current high level of unemployment, abject poverty and social vices in the country. It is the aim of this paper therefore, to employ secondary data by reviewing relevant literatures to



explore the negative effects of the societal bias and neglect accorded to vocational education in Nigeria with specific reference to northwestern region.

2. Literature Review

This section of the paper centers on the review of relevant literatures on the concepts of vocational education, poverty and the consequences of the neglect and bias against vocational education in Northwestern region of Nigeria.

2.1 The Concept of Vocational Education

The growing concern on the increasing multitudes of graduates at various levels of education that is accompanied by rising unemployment and chronic poverty calls for several studies that explain vocational education and its accruable benefits to nations' economic prosperity especially those of developing countries like Nigeria. Fafunwa (1985) viewed that the genesis of vocational education was to make education to be relevant to all socio-economic realities of the host community and the nation in general. These 'realities' depict the needs and aspirations of the nation which basically revolves on making those that are educated to be useful to themselves and their communities. It is in this light that Okoye and Arimonu (2016) opined that vocational education stands for a term that describes educational process which combines general education with the study of technologies and related sciences as well as practical skills acquisition; attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life. Primarily, vocational education aims at equipping individuals with skills needed for employment in recognized occupations (Chinwe, & Ezeabasili, 2014).

Vocational education helps young people to develop and attain their potentials through skills acquisition in different trades that attract their attention. Skills acquisition programs (such as vocational education) are deeply rooted in the philosophy of self-reliance through viable venture ownership which provides self-employment rather than wage earning employment (Adebisi & Oni, 2012). This form of education is needed as not all students would be better off with high level, years-long academic degrees. There are individual differences which account for huge and diverse range of skills and variation in learning styles. Thus, while physics, chemistry, economics and geography fascinate some students; others may only be good at "learning by doing" and would be good or better as artists, plumbers, photographers, gardeners and mechanics; and would be more at home with workshops and studios than classrooms.

Moreover, our society highly needs the services of these craftsmen which is so inadequate today (Chinwe, & Ezeabasili, 2014). However, despite this reality, Nigeria (our society) places a high value on the 'professions' and white-collar jobs, and we still consider blue collar work lower status. Thus, families want their members to pursue careers that will maintain or increase their 'status'. This is even more evident in high socio-economic communities.

Consequently, with this negative societal value system regarding vocational education in Nigeria, too much emphasis is placed on 'paper qualifications' thereby ignoring the required skills the holder supposed to have (Okoye & Arimonu, 2016). This is contrary to what is obtainable in developed countries where people with technical skills are highly placed because the value system in those countries emphasizes on skills and knowledge rather than files of academic degrees. In this regard, a study by Carnevale, Rose and Hanson (2012) found that in America people who obtain certificates at business, vocational, technical or trade schools earn 20 per cent more than those with only high school diploma or degrees.

According to May et al. (2007) vocational and technical education do not receive the attention they deserve from Nigerian government. There are issues relating to poor funding, inadequate and poorly motivated personnel in addition to stale and dilapidated facilities. These problems contributed in depriving Nigeria from attaining the needed economic progress as multitude of Nigerian youths who would have otherwise benefitted from vocational education and become gainfully employed are made unproductive due to their lack of employable skills.

The bias against vocational education in Nigeria is destructive to Nigerian youths in particular and the nation at large. Among the main negative effects of neglecting vocational education in Nigeria are chronic poverty; religious soldiering, political thuggery as well as drug addiction.

2.2 Poverty in Nigeria

There is consensus among economists that in the modern world, poverty has no definite meaning, but it is clarified in various ways (See, for example Mohamed et al. 2011; Justine, Ighodalo & Okpo, 2012; Casimir, Nwaoga & Ogbozor, 2014). This position is shared by Benedict (2011) who viewed that poverty affects all angles of human life: economic, political, social, physical and psychological. How poverty is being defined depends on from which angle it is viewed and the



criteria used in its conceptualization. According to Morduch & Haley (2002), the meaning of the term poverty and its appropriate means of measurement in addition to a deserving description of who a poor person is, becomes a subject of hot debate among scholars and practitioners. The argument here is whether poverty is to be viewed from the angle of material well-being as measured by income which determines what a person or household consumes or from a much wider view of needs that enhance well-being. Furthermore, an individual's condition and environment greatly affect how poverty is being defined (Casimir et al. 2014). Also, the type of definition given to poverty indicates how it is measured. Ugoh & Ukpere, (2009) view that poverty is multidimensional phenomenon and symbolizes absence or low income, malnutrition, poor, dilapidated or near absence of social amenities including healthcare resulting in high mortality as well as low life expectancy. Poverty is a state in which an individual who cannot find job is hungry, lacks decent accommodation and is unable to read or write. Additionally, poverty is characterized by unemployment, inability to have access to basic services such as healthcare, education and security in addition to social stigmatization and political exclusion. This broader view therefore, emphasizes on absence of any of the basic capabilities that are required to enjoy minimal functioning in a society. Similarly, Kaka and Abidin (2014) describe poverty in terms of resources (economic, social and political) insufficiency as a result of unemployment and lack of income-generating investment due to absence of capital that is aggravated by cultural and religious practices.

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa has been classified by the United Nations Human Poverty Index (HPI) in 2006 as one of the 25 poorest countries of the world (Ehinomen & Adeleke, 2012). This unfortunate categorization of the country is rather ironic: the country is highly endowed with vast natural resources both human and material (Amadi & Abdullah, 2012) that are supposed to be harnessed for economic growth and development which has a positive multiplier effect on citizens well-being. Indeed, it is this 'poverty in abundance' that earned the country a befitting description of "rich country full of poor people". Justifying this description, Obadan (1996) stated that Nigeria generated over US\$300 billion from crude oil exportation alone during the last three decades, yet Nigerians are subjected to excruciating poverty. The population projection of 2016 puts Nigeria's population at over 160 million (Crisis Group, 2010). With over 70 percent of the

population living on less than US\$1 a day, absolute poverty remains a long – standing problem that Nigerian government and its people are facing throughout the country (Ehinomen & Adeleke, 2012).

Whereas many countries have transformed from Low Income Countries (LICs) to Medium Income Countries (MICs), Nigerian situation is the opposite: from being a MIC in 1980s, Nigeria dropped to not only LIC but also one of the poorest in the community of poor nations (Benedict, 2011). Thus, in terms of human development, the United Nations HDI ranked the country as the 156th among the poorest countries of the world. Consequently, joblessness, hunger, ill-equipped or complete absence of health care facilities, insecurity, dilapidated infrastructures, high maternal mortality, low life expectancy as well as other forms of deprivations lend a true picture of who a hard core poor Nigerian is. With this 'misery in the midst of abundance', Nigerian government embarked upon series of programs at different time period with ultimate goal of reducing the ever-increasing poverty in the country (Ugoh & Ukpere, 2009; Justine, Ighodalo & Okpo, 2012).

Regrettably, the poverty trend in the country has been on the increase. The National Bureau of Statistics – NBS (2010) for instance, informed us that the number of people living in poverty increased from 27 per cent in 1980 to 46 per cent in 1985; and from 55 per cent in 2004 to 61 per cent in 2010. This trend of poverty is accounted for largely by unemployment due to defective educational system that was selfishly instituted by colonial masters (Okonkwo & Ezech, 2008). Accordingly, after independence, as observed by Adebisi and Oni, (2012) the same educational system which neglected vocational skills acquisition continues to prevail thereby producing streams of graduates who are not prepared for self-employment; and lack employable skills.

2.3 Religious Soldiering

Youth unemployment has today reached an alarming rate: our educational institutions are producing millions of graduates who are prepared for white-collar jobs that are not available. Most of these youth that seem to be serious minded are willing to work at less than the prevailing wage rate but cannot find any job. They therefore become not only restless but desperate as well; bringing into perspective the popular saying- 'an idle mind is a devil's workshop'. Faced with this condition, the hope and aspiration of these youth become eroded. They therefore, await the slightest 'opportunity' for them to carry arms for a 'jihad or



crusade' (Ma'aji, 2013). It is important to state here that these self-acclaimed "jihadists/crusaders" lack religious knowledge as they are ignorant of the religious provisions and consequences of their actions. They therefore, vandalize properties and kill innocent people; and expect paradise as a reward for their devilish acts (Adnan, 1987). Examples of incidences that showcased this devilish act of ethno-religious soldiering are numerous and fresh in our memories. The unfortunate spillover effect of Shagamu crisis, the German revivalist Reverend Reinhard Bonkke's planned visit as well as other so called religious wars has cumulative negative effect on the region's economy. Next, we can site cases of Zangon Katak in Kaduna state; Tafawa Balewa and Yelwan Shandam in Bauchi. The effect of these ill-starred so called religious wars (jihad and crusade) is loss of several lives and destruction of properties (Eze, 2017). Eze further submitted that religious conflicts or rather sectarian crisis are frequent affairs in Northern Nigeria, causing devastating consequences. The frequency of the occurrence of the crisis in the northern Nigeria has a bearing with the fact that the region has higher poverty incidence than its southern counterpart: northern Nigeria has 70 percent actual poverty incidence while southern region has 41 per cent (Obah-Akpowoghaha, 2013; CBN, 2008), cited in Justine, Ighodalo and Okpo (2012)

Again, Nigeria has so far committed huge amount of resources in her effort to address poverty in the country (Anger, 2010); and the unprecedented rise in the number of poverty induced religious crisis has become not only an issue of concern but a serious threat to the nation's security. For almost a decade the Boko Haram insurgency has been causing mayhem on several parts of the country with high intensity of attacks on North Eastern part where several local councils were under the control of the insurgents. The Boko Haram operations were more sophisticated in terms of intensity, organization and spread than the 1980s Maitatsine uprising (Adesoji, 2011). In fact, the quantum of escalating bomb and other improvised explosives attacks carried out by the sect as well as the use of several other dangerous weapons such as assault rifle, rocket launchers and automatic machine guns attest to the sect's sophistication (Olamilekan, 2014). This indicates that Nigeria has a long history of religious crisis that can be tailored to the country's neglect of vocational education which results in mass unemployment that made teaming desperate youths a ready market for recruiting 'jihadists and crusaders'.

2.4 Drug Abuse and Political Thuggery

There is no single universally accepted definition of the term 'drug abuse'. It can be viewed as any unspecified use of drug other than for legitimate purpose such that it interferes with the mental and or social function of the individual (Fareo, 2012). According to Nevadomsky (1981) for many years, the use and abuse of drugs, especially alcohol and tobacco were not classified as serious medical and social problems. The reason for this neglect may not be far fetch: they were behaviorally induced habits, albeit addictive, and their adverse implications were not given due importance until recent times. Drug abuse and addiction is rapidly increasing especially among young girls and boys who are constantly attached to taking cough syrup and inhaling solution meant for patching our vehicle tubes. This, in effect, has serious health, economic and social consequences on communities and the nation at large. In fact, nearly every deviant behavior in our society can be directly or indirectly linked to drug addiction (Nevadomsky, 1981). This is because the drug addicted youth are not economically independent; they are social outcasts; and very unproductive as they do not possess skills needed for employment consequent upon which they become vulnerable to being use as thugs (Omomia, 2015).

Youths who are violent, dangerous and are willing to carry illegal orders of their master are often described as thugs. Thus, Thuggery is a term that is employed to describe the dangerous behavior of a thug. Esiri (2016) informed us that the word thug originates from Hindu terminology 'thagi' or 'thag' which stands for an assassin or murderer. Politicians make use of thugs to 'take care' of any obstacle to attaining their political ambition of establishing control, dominance and electoral success. In this light therefore, political opponents and perceived enemies may be threatened or harmed as a warning; or completely 'wiped' out or eliminated by thugs assigned by their master. In most cases, thugs are used by opposition party or supporters to check the winning streak of an incumbent who it is widely believe can manipulate the state security apparatus to his advantage. In this regard, Haruna and Jumba (2011) opined that political thugs were used in the first republic by the Northern People Congress (NPC) to check the apparent winning chances of the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU). Furthermore, the power tussle between Awolowo and Akintola between 1960 and 1966 saw the use of thugs' services to achieve the objectives of the two heavy weights (Esiri, 2016).



Youth's political thuggery is a known feature of Nigerian politics. Today, most of our energetic but skill-less unemployed youths are reduced to thugs who are selfishly misused to achieve political ambition of political office holders and those aspiring for such offices (Abubakar, 2017). As political thugs, they are mostly motivated by false promises of employment and paid very little which they appreciate as they lack handwork and employable skills to fall back to. In some instances however, the thugs are remunerated with salaries, allowances; and or political appointments as special assistants, advisers, and personal assistants. Equally, where they cannot fill into these positions they are rewarded with juicy contracts at both federal, state and local government levels (Mbaya, 2013). When being used as political hooligans, these youth are given different identity depending on the area of their operation. For instance, everybody in Kano knows 'Yan Daba' and how terribly violent they can be. However, instead of giving them their real name of Yan Daba, they are referred to as "Yara" which literally means boys, in times of political misuse (Abubakar, 2017). Consequently, we may be faced with "Yaran chairman, Yaran commissioner and Yaran governor". It is in this light that Omomia (2015) reported that thugs chased out sitting councilors in Luyole Local Government of Oyo state simply because the legislators were suspected not to be in the camp of thugs' master who happened to be the chairman of the local government.

Youth political thuggery has become an integral part of political and electoral processes in Nigeria (Esiri, 2016). It is common practice in all states of the federation, bearing different names but using a common violent approach in accomplishing tasks given to them by their sponsors. For instance, these political thugs are known as "yan daba" or "yan banga" but formally "yan akusa" in Kano. Their counterparts in Borno and Yobe states are called "ecomog group" while the term "yan kalare" is their description in Gombe. Further, they are referred to as "sara-suka" and "yan ka waye" in Bauchi and Kaduna/Katsina states respectively (Mbaya, 2013). The criminality of these youthful political thugs does not end on their assigned targets. In some instances even their masters become subjects of intimidation and harassment when they fail to keep their words or meet up with the thugs' expectations (Haruna & Jumba, 2011). It needs no contention that the menaces of youth political thuggery can be reduced to the barest minimum if our youths are equipped with skills that will make them fend for themselves through effective vocational education and training.

3. Conclusion

This paper examined the effects of the bias against vocational education in Nigeria. The societal misconception about vocational education and its undeserving neglect has been identified as a root cause of the ever-increasing unemployment, poverty, religious soldiering, drug addiction, political thuggery and other social ills. This is accounted for by the fact that our system of education produces skills-less youth who continued to fall prey to the political class that manipulate and hire them for selfish political exigencies due to unemployment and chronic poverty. The paper argued that for a sustainable economic development to be achieved, the teeming Nigerian youths must be given functional education that can make them productive by fending for their selves and meaningfully contribute to their communities.

4. Recommendations

In order to address the problems of unemployment, poverty, religious soldiering, drug abuse and political thuggery in Nigeria, this paper recommends:

1. Government and other stakeholders must be seen to be proactive in promoting and supporting; by taking concrete action and bravely addressing the nonchalant attitude and bias against vocational education.
2. Our educational curricula should be enriched with effective career guidance programs especially at lower and higher secondary schools so that students can be helped to fully understand and realize their potentials; and become useful members of their communities.
3. Vocational secondary school system that existed in the 80s should be revisited and strengthen. This should be aimed at bringing to the limelight the needed emphasis on vocational skills acquisition which will reduce the over dependence on the non-existing white collar jobs.
4. Rather than giving direct financial benefits to the unemployed youth government commitment should be seen in adequate funding of all skill-acquisition programs. Equally, technical colleges, vocational education schools as well as polytechnics should be stocked with needed facilities and highly motivated staff.
5. There should be strong religious initiative to promote healthy sermon on moral values and sanctity of human life and properties so that "crusaders/jihadists" and political thugs can



understand the religious provisions and consequences of vandalizing properties and taking innocent lives as a result of religious or

political differences. To achieve this, there should be a formidable advocacy from government and other stakeholders.

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