

Education stakeholders' Forum amounted to a charade

Written by Administrator

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THE Federal Ministry of Education organized what it called a Stakeholders Forum for reform initiatives in the education sector in Nigeria. The Forum, to which the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) was invited, held at NICON NOGA HILTON HOTEL, Abuja, between 10.00 a.m and 6.00 p.m on Tuesday 17 October, 2006. ASUU sent a delegation to the forum, expecting that the FORUM would present a genuine opportunity to put forward, examine and collectively adopt proposals based on informed, free, un-manipulated deliberations by academics, students, federal, state and local governments, university administrators and other groups tagged stakeholders. Unfortunately, however, what went on in the stakeholders Forum amounted to a charade, the aim of which was to legitimize, in a most unacceptable manner, predetermined policies that the organizers and their consultants were not confident could survive the scrutiny of Nigerians who have deep knowledge of the history and causes of the decay in our educational institutions today, and how the education system actually works.

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THE SET-UP AND PROCEEDINGS AT THE FORUM

The forum was divided into about eight thematic groups referred to as Task Groups. In each group, there was a task leader who briefly introduced the task to be achieved and the team members. The impression was created that the general goal was to formulate policies derived from thoroughly debated proposals that would bring desired changes to the Education Sector, and to chart a course for sound education in Nigeria between 2006 and 2020. Yet at the plenary discussion, the coordinator presented, not a proposal to be deliberated upon but a predetermined policy statement into which the thematic discussions of the Task Team were to be slotted as the Federal Ministry of Education deemed fit.

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The presentations in the thematic groups were presented by the Task Team leaders, who were largely consultants to the Federal Ministry of Education or persons drawn from the Federal Ministry of Education parastatals. Participants were not given any written summaries. They had no working papers whatsoever to refer to. Under this condition, the rational conclusion is that participants were not meant to really debate the presentations on the basis of prior thorough perusal of the proposals which they were not, at any rate, given.

ASUU had gone to the forum with a comprehensive proposal on a far-reaching reform (transformation) of the system of education from pre-tertiary to tertiary education, on adult literacy, and on mass education. The systematic alternative which ASUU was to present, but which the organizers shut out, covered the themes on which presentations were made and more.

The forum presented no debate on the entire philosophy of education, and none on the cultural determinants in the development of education. It considered no profound shift in the education paradigm, no re-think of the basics of formal education, and no conceptualization of life-long education, etc.

The official presentations, and that was all there was, were made without reference to painstaking investigations into the Nigerian education system made since 1960.

Working to pre-determined answers, the consultants and leaders of the forum did not show awareness of alternative proposals coming out of studies by Nigerian scholars. For example, the organizers and consultants proposed reforms in the tertiary education sector as if they had never read Professor Chukuka Okonjo *THE QUIET REVOLUTION: On Creating an Information-age Education System for Nigeria*. They discussed Higher Education Reforms as if the comprehensive Report of the the Commission on the Review of Higher Education in Nigeria: *Higher Education in the Nineties and beyond (1991)* did not exist. They discussed reforms in Governance, ICT, Assets and Physical Infrastructure, Access and Equity, Education, Economy and Competitiveness, Standards Assessments and Accountability, and Financing Education in complete abstraction from the history of previous attempts to reform the system.

The result is that most of the recommendations made were, in our view, superficial.

The presentations on ICT created the erroneous impression that ICT would solve problems such as Cultism in the educational system. Recommendations deemed so vital on ICT were made without an adequate account of how the economic requirements for their implementation could be met. The discussion on access and equality was restricted, superficially, to special education (for the physically challenged, girl-child, and adults). But the genuine problem of access is How can educational institutions increase access, while at the same time maintaining equity and diversity in the admission process between members of the competing ethnic groups and still remain financially viable?

Superficial questions could only lead to superficial answers. The forum lacked profound questions and answers. It was premised upon the same worn out assumption: reforms must be driven by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Faith-based Organizations (FBOs)

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Community Based Organisations (CBOs) consultants and contractors, by the theology of the private sector, a theology which no serious country seeking educational advancement has put into practice. The implicit philosophy of education in the official position is that education is for entrepreneurship and job creation. The long-standing position that the goal of education is to create good citizens is abandoned without a national debate among experts. The official presentation seems to give a causal explanation of cultism without the appreciation of the correlation of cultism with the conditions of living of our students, and the nature of the economy. It, again superficially, sought solutions to the problems of insecurity on campuses and examination malpractices through policing and punitive measures, in abstraction from the causes of these problems.

Because there was no real dialogue, contributions helpful to resolving the essential problems were lost. Take the Education Tax Fund (ETF), Nigerians do not know that the Board of Trustees of the Education Tax Fund (ETF) has persistently violated the EDUCATION TAX FUND (AMENDMENT) ACT, 2003, which mandates the Board to include in the management of the Fund the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP), College of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU), the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), the All Nigerian Conference of Principals of Secondary Schools (ANCOPSS). The ETF Board illegally shuts out ASUU for one reason: ASUU has, for years, called into question the compliance of the Board use of the funds with the law that set it up. Any significant reform in the funding of education should subject the Board of Trustees to careful scrutiny.

DELEGATION TO THE FORUM

ASUU observed that the delegates appeared to have been selected along the line of the composition of the National Council on Education, in which the majority of delegates were usually selected from the Ministry and its parastatals. It was observed that the delegates to the forum were drawn from the Federal Ministry of Education, the Heads/Directors of its parastatals, and other bodies such as National Teachers Institute (NTI), National Board of Technical Education (NBTE), the Universal Basic Education (UBE), the National Universities Commission (NUC), mingled with their operators, their contractors, their project executors, the organizers and their consultants, the majority of whom have no inner knowledge of Nigeria education system. It is clear that such a composition was not, and could not be a true representative of the stakeholders in Education in Nigeria. It is selective, arbitrary and without any firm, well-thought out-base, made simply to give the impression of a consensus whose outcome is already predetermined.

A stakeholder is akin to a shareholder with an investment at stake which has to be protected. At best, the groups as constituted in the forum could be described as collection of interest groups with interests varying from actually having investment at stake to protect, groups that are protecting their jobs, to those that are responding purely to the orders and fancies of their bosses and some who are exploiters of education sector, and who are only interested in the profit margin, or in what is to be paid for the job of convincing (or is it confusing) the audience at

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the shortest possible time, in order to save cost of running the forum, thereby maximizing profit.

It is very grave that real stakeholders such as the parents, the Parents-Teachers Association (PTA), the Students, Eminent Educators, State and Local Government Education Authorities and the Universities as a body. The level of effective contribution and participation was compromised. As a result the sequential progression of events was generally destabilized, with the following results:

*Presentations, contributions and the plenary sessions were hurried, lacked depth and were ineffective.

*Feedback presentations at the general forum started so late (at about 4.00 p.m), were hurried and uncoordinated, inexhaustive and generally at the surface level.

*Discussions on all issues were either not entertained at all, (participants were requested to write their comments and questions, submit same and expect responses at a later date via their e-mail addresses). Alternatively, where there were interactions (two themes out of about eight), questions and comments were limited to only two, with the instruction to the respondents to be short, sharp and succinct.

Although the last session was to be devoted to a general conclusion, no such collective session took place. So no consensus was established on any theme. None could have been reached.

This does not lend credence to the claim that the forum could chart a new course for the next decade and a half for education, which is the fulcrum of national development. Opinions were already concretized and any departure from such set views were either frowned at or completely rebuffed. It is easy to conclude that the scenario was pre-determined and stage-managed. At no time was any working paper provided to participants. Participants were expected to recollect from their memory the presentations and to contribute from what they could recollect.

Worse still is the fact that even the predetermined opinions as presented appeared to be arbitrary, devoid of a sound basis. No data were presented to justify the official positions pushed, no statistical evidence was presented to validate the figures used, and most critical, at the close of the forum, even as selective as it was, there were no concrete agreements and no conclusions drawn based on the presentations. It is only rational, therefore, to conclude that whatever conclusions and recommendations emerged were the outcome of collaborative manipulations between the organizers and their consultants, a position that could not by any stretch of imagination be said to represent the views of the stakeholders.

CONCLUSION WAY FORWARD

It should be pointed out that the ultimate objective of any form of education is to improve human kind. The ultimate goal should be to enable citizens play a creative role in their society and to

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contribute maximally towards the production and reproduction of the material and cultural needs of their society. There is no doubt that there is an intellectual urgent need for NATIONAL EDUCATION SUMMIT in Nigeria. A National Education Summit is urgently needed to redress the accumulated neglect of the sector and the consequent down-turn of the state of education, and to work out creative and inspiring reforms that would drive Nigeria education to a place among the best in the world. This has been the realistic dream of Nigerians since the early post-colonial years.

A stakeholder forum properly so-called is expected to be composed from all sectors at all the various levels of education, from pre-school to the tertiary level. Stakeholders should be organized at each level. The themes should be generated from these groups and not from the Ministry. The problems at each level should be identified. After this, the participants should come together to discuss and proffer unmanipulated appropriate solutions to the identified problems. Nobody should believe that a genuine forum to propel the education in Nigeria has been organized. Doing that would amount to the highest form of self-deceit, which would lead invariably to a more rapid downslide of the education system in Nigeria.

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For and on behalf of the National Executive Council

Monday October 30, 2006