

Full Length Research Paper

Borderless Learning: Leveraging International Education to Accelerate Economic Freedom Across ECOWAS Nations

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The Economic Community of West African States was established in 1975 with the view to fast tracking economic development in the West African sub-region. However, thirty-three years after, ECOWAS is only struggling to rid itself of those obstacles that have prevented it from achieving its goal. Chief among those obstacles are illiteracy, wars, poor health care delivery, gender inequality and poverty. A number of steps have been taken in the past to see to it that the main objective of ECOWAS is achieved; these steps have not brought the expected result; ECOWAS therefore remains with its challenges. However, it is here suggested that if ECOWAS would employ a strategy that will bring its citizens to learn about themselves and about the potentials of their community, then, it will succeed in achieving its objective of functional integration. A process of learning such as this, is known as “international education”. In this specific sense, promotion of functional learning of French and English languages, development of traditional medicine, continuous research into indigenous and modern strategies of conflict resolution, promotion of gender equality and reduction of poverty through new cross border types of learning are activities identified as harbinger of opportunities that will lead ECOWAS citizens to learn more about themselves and eventually act in a way that will become beneficial to the generality of the members of this community. This is international education and the benefit thereof is the eventual functional integration of West African countries.

Key words: Ecowas, education, international education, poverty, development.

INTRODUCTION

Most countries of West Africa attained political independence in 1960 with a few acceding to independence a little earlier and yet a few others gaining independence after 1960. These countries spent the first decade of their existence, restructuring their political, social and economic institutions with the view to serving a larger portion of their populations in a much better way than did colonial administrations.

Consequently, many more schools were established, more political offices were open up and the provision of basic social amenities such as water, electricity and recreational and sporting facilities was greatly expanded.

However, these new nations soon discovered that while it is good and expedient to provide the citizens with social amenities and comfort, the provision of these things is contingent upon the existence of a viable economy and sustained productive activities. After about a decade of existence, the leaders of these new nations, relying on

the potentials of their large and fast growing work force, chose to pool together their work force resources and their produce with the view to creating wealth that would ultimately enable them serve their populations much better.

Consequently, an economic community was established whose main objective is economic integration in all fields (industry, transport, telecommunication, energy, agriculture, commerce, social and cultural) with the view to bringing economic and social prosperity to West Africans (<http://www.ecowas.int>. May 11, 2007).

Thirty-three years after, an assessment of the achievements of ECOWAS reveals that this major objective of the community remains yet to be actualised. This is not surprising as a thorough understanding of that which needs to be integrated is a prerequisite to successful integration; in other words, if the integration of the activities of ECOWAS countries is to be carried through with

minimal difficulty, a process that will facilitate a thorough understanding by all ECOWAS citizens of the realities in each country is to be evolved. International education is an ideal example of such a process.

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

The source and rationale for international education must be traced to the events of the last quarter of the 20th century; such events were those that brought to the fore and compelled humanity to rediscover the concept of human brotherhood. It was those events that strongly suggested to world leaders that humanity, wherever it may be found, is destined to stand and survive together or sink and perish together.

In a more specific sense, the consequences of technical-industrial development, the globalisation of world economy, the need to approach international development activities with a greater spirit of collaboration and the desire on the part of individuals and interest groups to reach out to other individuals and groups, fostered and promoted international education (Klaffki, 1996; Knight, 2003; Hudzik, 2009).

In other words, international education is a process during which, a person or group of persons, having been compelled by socio-psychological, ecological and/or economic conditions to seek solutions to local problems or greater welfare beyond national boundaries, acquires new skills, knowledge and attitudes for the purpose of achieving these afore mentioned objectives. However, if this process is usually initially understood as a survival strategy, it ultimately reveals the beauty and force of human interdependence as they concern advancement of collective welfare and reduction of egocentrism; this is why it is logical, especially within the context of the present discussion, to view international education as a process through which a group of persons or political entities identify and study a common problem or threat with the view to deriving useful lessons in their quest for better welfare for themselves and subjects.

International education is therefore a suitable process for fostering both the integration dream of ECOWAS and for promoting rapid emancipation of its constituent parts because the problems which individual countries would have been unable to identify and solve can be solved through identifying and studying them collectively within relevant educational and strategic study institutions; additionally, the spirit of belonging to a common organisation, apart from adding to the wealth of crises management strategies that may be available to member nations, will tend to reduce the number of possible cases of disagreement among nations.

The operationalisation of the concept of international education within ECOWAS territory therefore has the potentials of smoothening out the obstacles to regional integration. What then have been these obstacles and

how may they be smoothened out through international education?

THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES AND ITS CHALLENGES

The first of these challenges which has remained visible and intractable within the ECOWAS region since inception is illiteracy; the second of these challenges is war while the third, fourth and fifth challenges are respectively, weak and poor health care delivery system, gender inequality and poverty.

Illiteracy

Illiteracy remains an issue in all ECOWAS countries even if most organisations have tended to single out high population countries for treatment and major assistance; although this malaise has been put on the front burner since 1960, at the beginning of the 21st century, it still remains an intractable problem in Africa in general and in West Africa in particular.

In 2002, the World Bank selected 23 countries for its 'EFA Fast Track' initiative; one ECOWAS country, Nigeria, the most populous black nation on earth and the richest of all ECOWAS countries was one of these 23 countries; additionally, Nigeria with 4 other countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Congo) currently 'account for nearly half of estimated world wide total of 113 million children out of school' (Torres, 2003: 54). In addition, while Nigeria was the only ECOWAS country mentioned as one of the most illiterate countries in the Delhi Declaration during the 1990 World Conference on Education and while Hough (1989:78) submitted that Francophone West African countries, for many years after independence, maintained relative high rates of literacy, out of the 23 countries adopted by the 2002 World Bank Fast Track initiative, could be found 3 ECOWAS countries among which were 2 Francophone countries (Burkina Faso and Niger Republic) (Torres, 2003: 53).

Yet, literacy is more than a right; it is a key to the twenty-first century. It is both a consequence of active citizenship and condition for full participation in society (Ouane, 2006: ix).

If the picture of illiteracy painted thus far, concerns national illiteracy situation, that is, illiteracy rates measured within the frontiers of individual ECOWAS countries, we are yet to learn about the most debilitating type of illiteracy ECOWAS as a community suffers from.

ECOWAS is made up of countries that fall into two official language blocs; five countries have English as official language while ten countries carry out official business in French language.

Biao (1995) found out that although ECOWAS Coun-

tries made sporadic efforts at literacising their populations, the types of literacy promoted by these countries were not those that stimulated vigorous commercial and economic interactions and integration as the literacy programmes promoted were seen to be traditional literacy programmes located within the boundaries of each country.

This situation has not improved as there is currently, no official policy encouraging the learning of French language on a massive scale by English speaking countries and the learning of English language on a massive scale by French speaking countries. Yet, language is an important instrument of integration as when commonly understood, it tends to break down all factors and tendencies to suspicion and misunderstanding.

As long as governments of ECOWAS would not deliberately promote the learning of English and French languages by French and English speaking populations of the region, so long shall there exist a near one hundred percent "trans-border" illiteracy rate within the ECOWAS region and as long as this situation remains, that is, as long as large masses of people would keep experiencing functional illiteracy once they cross their own borders, so long shall the dream of integration of the ECOWAS region remain a mere dream.

For an eventual successful implementation of an ECOWAS illiteracy eradication plan, accent must be put on functionality; not only should functional literacy be promoted, the whole literacy education structure itself should be made functional; in this vein, while provision should be made to teach French or English languages as appropriate in all formal schools, these languages should also be taught in non-formal education structures such as evening learning centres, club houses, market places and religious centres.

Additionally, the teaching of these languages for the purpose of promoting the objective of ECOWAS needs to emphasize only those aspects that would enable people hold sensible conversation and engage in economic activities with some level of linguistic and commercial understanding.

Wars

Between 1975, year of the establishment of ECOWAS and 2008, about half of ECOWAS countries had prosecuted or are still prosecuting one war or the other within their borders. There was war in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and there was war going on in 2008 in Niger, Mali and Togo to cite but a few.

Wars are nothing but obvious disruptions to any developmental programme. A recent United Nations report on the performance of African countries towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals revealed that the nations of Africa including those in West Africa spend about 80% of their earnings on prosecuting wars (UN,

2007). Apart from the fact that countries coming out of wars would need to expend many resources for the purpose of rehabilitating ruined infrastructures and socio-psychological environment accommodating their citizens, those still prosecuting wars would be mobilising resources only for wars; none of these activities is relevant to furthering ECOWAS mission.

Yet, it is not as if a number of wars have not been averted before in the region. Although not many examples can be cited, the Nigeria-Cameroon resolution of the disputed Bakasi peninsula and the Benin-Niger Republics resolution of the disputed northern border (Highbeam, 2002; International Court of Justice, 2005) are classical examples of how conflicts may be averted and issues resolved peacefully within the region.

As for internal communal conflicts which in some cases threaten regional stability, both indigenous and modern conflict resolution strategies would need to be employed. However, notice must be taken of the fact that the causes of these conflicts are not only dynamic but they could also be peculiar and typically African indeed.

For example, "in the last decade of the 20th century, a new kind of armed conflict has emerged in West Africa, consisting in chaotic battles with no clearly defined political agenda in which it is hard to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants and where civilians suffer most" (Ayissi, 2002). Additionally, some conflicts may be instigated by powers outside the region which aim at protecting external interests within the region.

In the face of this high level of dynamism of the causes of conflicts within the region, only a deliberate and conscious effort at studying the factors that bring about both internal and cross boundary conflicts would enlighten politicians and policy makers. It is this enlightenment, which constitutes a phase of international education, that will empower these managers of social affairs to enact laws and comport themselves in ways that will reduce to the barest minimum, wars and social crises. It is imperative that systematic cross border research should be carried out in this area for the purpose of first identifying the wealth of each country of the community in conflict resolution strategies and with the view to ultimately developing a West African Conflict Resolution Strategy Template which can now become part of curricula of learning and public enlightenment programmes in the region. Naturally, continuous research shall be needed to keep unearthing new relevant strategies and for the purpose of keeping testing the efficacy of both new and old indigenous and modern conflict resolution strategies in the resolution of conflicts and disagreements within the region.

Suffice it to say that conflict resolution processes that had relied on the support and participation of traditional rulers and/or religious leaders had had some measure of success and further research is needed in this area to strengthen the potentials of these processes of conflict resolution.

Health care delivery

Only a healthy citizenry can bring economic buoyancy and economic integration. ECOWAS countries, like many countries in Africa are afflicted by numerous health challenges. Governments on their part have been trying as much as possible to confront the challenges boldly.

Whether it concerns malaria, HIV and AIDS, viral epidemics, the child killer diseases or other health challenges, ECOWAS countries have been deploying energy and funds to meet the challenges.

For example pharmaceutical companies make brisk business in the region. A large network for the distribution of genuine pharmaceutical products exists within the region and pharmaceutical companies themselves are making huge turnover; for example, "a March 2003 report shows the pharmaceutical industry has made tremendous progress in the past two years. A 35% rise in the industry's turnover within the period 2001 - 2003 was reported and one of the industry's major players has recorded a 77% increase in sales" (Alabi, 2003)

Unfortunately, the success of genuine pharmaceutical industry in the region is but about half of the success of counterfeit and substandard pharmaceutical industry in the region.

Nigeria and many other countries of the region lose billions of dollars to counterfeit and substandard drug dealers on a yearly basis (Alabi, 2003). Naturally, the region loses not only money but also quality of health, human lives and credibility through the activities of fake drug dealers.

Yet, this community has a wealth in natural pharmaceutical products which if tapped, will not only foster greater integration of the region (as each country will seek the products available in the other country of the region), but will bestow on the community, riches in funds and health.

"Over 80% of Africans depend mainly on medicinal plants for health care delivery" (Morah, 2009). This implies that for purpose of therapy, most Africans submit themselves to traditional medical practitioner whom Morah (2009: 4 - 5) describes as a multidimensional health worker as he/she plays the roles of a pharmacist, a nurse, a dispenser and clinical psychologist.

Since traditional medicine is an approved practice both by God and by World Health Organization (Morah, 2009) and since within ECOWAS countries can be found in its natural state and at little cost to all ECOWAS citizens both the main drugs used by the traditional medical practitioner and the patient himself/herself and since the risks of faking and counterfeiting the plants that grow naturally in the environment of the West African is nearly zero, ECOWAS will do well to develop its potentials in traditional medicine instead of continuing to subject the lives of its citizens to great hazards.

Not only will efforts at developing traditional medicine speed up the process of regional integration, these efforts

will also save lives, bring greater capital in-flow and protect against psychological traumas occasioned by incidences of fake drugs and high cost of orthodox medical care. Additionally, West Africans would have learnt a great deal about their individual countries' potentials which until now had remained unknown to them.

To achieve this health delivery related objective, some enlightenment which would necessarily begin from health institutions (medical schools, medical research institutions, hospitals, etc..) simultaneously within and across the countries will be needed as foundation; from this foundational exercise, information needed by the general public to promote the success of this re-orientation, may now be sifted out for inclusion in both formal and non-formal educational curricula of all countries of the community.

Gender inequality

West Africa, like Africa is still a male dominated society in spite of the great efforts being deployed to give women a voice.

Out of a total population of about 350 million in-habitants, female population accounts for about half the total ECOWAS population; additionally, one single country, Nigeria, holds within its borders 141 million in-habitants (National Population Commission, 2006), about half the total ECOWAS population. Despite the sub-mission by Rakodi and Tony (2002) to the effect that developing countries are currently experiencing rapid urbanisation, about 70% of ECOWAS population still lives in the rural areas (IFAD, 2007); while it is true that West Africa is not left out in the race for urbanisation, this region does not possess the financial muscle that can enable it to combine effectively the responsibilities of feeding and creating employment for its fast growing population with rapid urbanisation of the rural areas. Therefore, while some measure of urbanisation of rural areas is going on, the rate of this urbanisation in West Africa still remains at a level where about 70% of its population continues to live in rural areas even at this beginning of the 21st century. And it is precisely in these rural areas that the most obvious forms of gender discrimination and inequality are made manifest.

For example, in Nigeria where about half of ECOWAS citizens reside, the ratio of female to male primary school enrolment is 1:5, 1:7 and 1:10 respectively depending on the region of Nigeria under scrutiny (Mangwat and Abama, 1999:47). In Burkina Faso and other countries of the Community, the situation is not different. Indeed, the reality of the inequality suffered by girls and women in ECOWAS is more poignantly brought home when one learns about Ouane (2005: vii)'s submission that out of more than the 800 million illiterates existing world wide, two thirds are women.

Yet, that education is a right of every human being is a

submission accepted by all; even among the uneducated the statement 'Educate the woman and you have educated the whole nation' still remains a popular saying.

Indeed, the education of women is of great importance for overcoming socio-economic dependence and exploitation; for enhancing socio-economic status; for knowing of one's rights, privileges and responsibilities; for improving homes and for molding the character of children during their most vulnerable years during growth. Evidence shows that a mother's education is perhaps the single most important determinant of a family's health and nutrition; and that education enhances agricultural productivity (Mangvwat and Abama, 1999:11).

Specific to the main objective of ECOWAS, eradication of gender inequality has the potentials of increasing women's participation in greater productive activities; the greater the participation of women in productive activities, the wealthier will the region become and the more integrated will it eventually become.

It is not believed that gender inequality may be eradicated without more rigorous work on the part of all. It is at this level that all organisations that have been working at the side of women in the region are invited to increase their engagement with rural women since 70% of ECOWAS citizens live in the rural areas.

With different social crises during the last two decades of the 20th century, another kind of phenomenon began to develop in some ECOWAS countries whereby more girls than boys are found in formal schools. UNICEF has spotted this developing trend and had developed non-formal education curricula which will eventually help boys in this situation mainstream into the formal system of education at a later date. It is advised that authorities keep watch on progress in this sector so as to prevent the growth of another kind of inequality while the process is on to solve the initial inequality that concerns girls and women.

Judging from the high degree of lip service paid to gender issues in general and to the neglect of girls and women's rights in particular by the male dominated leadership in African countries over the years, there is need for an initial task of conscientizing West African governments themselves on the negative effects of gender problems on the socio-economic life of the region. This conscientisation and subsequent coordination of work in this area would need to be carried out by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which had shown time-honoured faith in the worth of girls and women of the region.

These non-governmental organisations will achieve little if they limited their activities within individual countries; however, greater success shall be theirs if they are able to network and synergise their activities across West African frontiers; this way they will become a strong force not easy to ignore. Through this approach, these non-governmental organisations will not only succeed in conscientising the region's leadership on the need to take

seriously gender issues but they would have equally succeeded in positioning themselves as reliable allies of governments in the process of eradicating naughty gender-related problems on a continuous basis.

Conscientisation is a process of education through which an individual or group of individuals is made aware of situations which otherwise were not meaningful or significant enough to be noticed. A successful network of conscientisation programmes is expected to unearth the nature of existing stumbling blocks to the resolution of gender-related issues and prescribe solutions to removing these blocks throughout the West African region. Conscientisation carried on this way would have contributed to the promotion of the type of international education which would have identified individual national gender issues, would have fused all these issues into one West African curriculum of learning and would have used the said curriculum to improve the gender-related environment within the region.

Poverty

ECOWAS countries are poor countries. Eleven out of the 15 countries making up the Community appear on the list of UN's list of world's 50 poorest countries (UN, 2002); these 11 countries include Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

The UN classifies countries as 'least developed' based on three criteria:

- (1) Annual gross domestic product (GDP) below \$900 per capita.
- (2) Quality of life based on life expectancy at birth, per capita calorie intake, primary and secondary school enrolment rates and adult literacy.
- (3) Economic vulnerability, based on instability of agricultural productions and export, inadequate diversification and economic smallness (UN, 2002).

If the findings describing ECOWAS countries as poor countries were a few years old, it is note worthy that those findings remain the same today; indeed the poverty level of West Africa may have indeed worsened as the UN's Millennium Development Goals Report (2007) submits that 'despite the gains in sub-Saharan Africa, that region's poverty gap remains the highest in the world' (p.2).

While unfreedom, especially at the level of girls and women, is another type of poverty which can be noticed in the region, the emphasis here is on material or economic poverty.

With steady greater integration of the region and with the development of the resources of ECOWAS countries, incidence of poverty will be lowered as poverty is really the product of inaction or inappropriate actions towards

the integration of West Africa.

Incongruity of educational curricula with socio-economic realities of West Africa, inability to optimally exploit the agricultural sector which constitutes the mainstay of West African economy, marginalisation of women are some of the factors that exacerbate poverty condition in Africa. Through the formal education system, many youths are equipped with skills which are not needed by employers of labour; the agricultural sector remains physical labour intensive and is therefore not attractive to the youths and women are not trained to play any significant role in production.

The advent of a large number of private universities in West Africa beginning from the 1990s has begun to sensitise the leadership of the region on both the necessity and workability of educational curricula packaged in line with employment opportunities available within the region. Nigeria and a few other countries in the region have now positioned their 2010 national budgets to begin funding mechanised agriculture and these countries have already invited a few white Zimbabwean farmers who have established farms that will serve both as production and educational centres.

These interactions among the universities, leaders, farmers and the West African populations are processes of international education which will eventually contribute to reduction of poverty within the region.

Conclusion

The founding of the Economic Community of West African States is a laudable venture. However, the venture is yet to deliver on the expectations of the citizens of the sub-region because of the daunting challenges it has been plagued with.

It is appreciated that a number of steps have been taken and are being taken to address the challenges facing this regional organisation. It is however, through the adoption and promotion of strategies that pool together the people of ECOWAS countries with the view to enabling them learn not only about the region's potentials but about themselves, that ECOWAS shall eventually realise its dream of functional integration.

International Education therefore is a need of ECO-WAS today, not only because of the relevance of the learning it has to offer, but also because of its potential to link and connect each ECOWAS country to all other ECOWAS countries in the search for solutions to the challenges facing this regional organisation.

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