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UNICEF AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL OF ITS INTERVENTION IN THE PROBLEM OF OUT-OF SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE NIGER DELTA:

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Abstract

This study examined the role of the United Nations in the development of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The study assessed the impact of the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) in the development of the Niger Delta, with particular focus on out-of-school children (OOSC). The study adopted the descriptive analytical approach as well as the dependency theoretical framework. Moreover, the study relied on both primary and secondary data sources. Findings of the study shows that UNICEF interventions have had positive impact on activities that promote the wellbeing of children in the region. The findings further revealed that the main causes of out-of-school children are poor governance structure and weak enforcement of extant legislation's on children education. The findings also suggest that UNICEF interventions cannot produce far-reaching results without a corresponding commitment from the government and policy makers in the region. The paper recommends attitudinal change by policy makers and increased budgetary allocation to the education sector, as well as the need to entrench a strong monitoring and evaluation system in the education sector, so as to prevent the diversion of funds meant for educational programmes that promote children enrolment in primary/secondary schools in the region.

Keywords: Development, UNICEF, Out-of-School Children, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

One essential responsibility of every government is the promotion of the socio-economic and political well-being of its citizens. This, in fact is enshrined in the constitutions of many African countries. However, despite these constitutional provision, the continent has sunk much deeper into a crisis of development that is worse than the period between 1954 to 1970, when many countries in the Global South attained independence.

The commission for Africa report (2005:17) found that:

Africa is the poorest region of the world...comparison between Africa and Asia are revealing. For 30 years ago, the average income of sub-Saharan Africa was twice that of both South and East Asia. In the intervening decades, an astonishing turn

around has taken place. The average income in Africa is now well below half of that in East Asia. The story is similar in south Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Africa is the only continent in the world which is stagnating.

Development is a major problem facing many states in Nigeria including states within the Niger Delta region of the country. The developmental challenge facing the Niger Delta is rooted in the economic and political structure of the Nigerian federation. Whereas, the region contributes substantially (about 90%) to the national revenue, it exemplifies a contrast between enormous wealth and severe underdevelopment (Obian, 2022). Some of the developmental challenges are not within the powers of the region to address, but majority of the development issues are due to poor internal governance structure. For instance, a 2022 survey by

the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Multidimensional Poverty Index ranked Bayelsa State as the second poorest state in the federation using indicators such as healthcare, food security, education, nutrition, and access to cooking fuel (NBS, 2022).

Several international development partners have initiated policies and programs to address the development deficit in Nigeria. One of such institution is the United Nations through its various agencies. These interventions and financial commitments are not substitutes for well-intentioned government policies to tackle development, but are complements to the efforts of the various states in the region. One main agency rendering assistance to less-developed countries is the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF).

UNICEF was established in 1946 to provide relief to children in countries devastated by World War II. However, from the 1950s, UNICEF directed its efforts toward general programs for the improvement of children's welfare, particularly in less-developed countries and in various emergency situations. In the Niger Delta, UNICEF interventions are focused on areas such as; education, communication for development, emergencies, social policy, Child Protection, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, Health and HIV, and Nutrition (). These programs such as the Nigeria Girl's education Project (NGEP) implemented by the agency are visible throughout the Niger Delta, and cuts into the socio-fabric of the society (Nwozor and Okhillu, 2020).

Several scholars have examined the effect of UNICEF programmes in Nigeria. For instance, Okafor (2025) noted that the intervention of UNICEF enhanced children enrolment rates and retention levels significantly in Anambra State. Agusiobo (2018) examined the education of the girl-child in Nigeria, and noted that the effort of international institutions like UNICEF helps to bridge the gender-gap in the education of female and male children, and ensure that the rights of the girl child is protected, and her well-being sustained. This study departs from these earlier studies as it examines UNICEF activities in the Niger Delta, with particular focus on out-of-school children.

The concept of Out-of-school children is used to refer to the percentage of children who are of primary school age, but are not enrolled in primary and secondary school. The rate of Out of school children is an indicator of the level of development in a country. Hence, this study seems warranted, given that more than 10.5 million children are not in school in Nigeria, even though public primary education is compulsory and tuition free (UNICEF, 2023).

The broad objective of this study is to examine UNICEF and development in Nigeria, with core emphasis on its interventions in the problem of out-of-school children in the Niger Delta. The specific objectives are as follows:

- i. To examine the causes and threats of out-of-school children in the Niger Delta region; and
- ii. To proffer solutions to reduce this menace of out of school children in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 which seeks to provide education for all by the year 2030.

The rest of the paper is laid out as follows. In Section 2, theoretical and conceptual issues are discussed, while Section 3 discusses the methodology and Scope. Section 4 is the descriptive analysis, and Section 5 concludes the study as well as makes policy recommendations.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

UNICEF:

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is a special program of the United Nations (UN) established in 1946 to provide relief to children in countries devastated by World War II (Britannica.com). These interventions are provided during emergency and non-emergency situations. Its specific area of interest include Health and HIV, Nutrition, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, Education, Child Protection, Social Policy, Emergencies such as conflicts and natural disaster, and Communication for Development.

These programmes have been the main policy targets of UNICEF as development partners especially in the developing countries. Though these interventions have had positive impacts in the Niger Delta, such successes require a corresponding commitment from government to have far reaching effects. This study examines

UNICEF interventions in the education sector with particular focus on out-of-school children (OOSC). The primary aim of UNICEF in the educational sector is to:

support the government in achieving SDG 4 by 2030 through improved planning and by addressing some of the systemic barriers that hinder the implementation of an effective education strategy.

UNICEF Programmes in the Niger Delta:

UNICEF has implemented several programmes to improve the lives of children in the Niger Delta. Some of the programmes implemented in Niger Delta includes:

- i. Provision of six ambulance boats to the Bayelsa state government to improve healthcare and emergency response in riverine communities in remote areas.
- ii. Donation of therapeutic diets to lactating and expectant mothers (pregnant women) in Bayelsa state to prevent child mortality.
- iii. Reduction of illnesses emanating from poor environmental practices by promoting water, sanitation and hygiene (Wash) and encouraged Open Defecation Free (ODF).
- iv. Immunization and provision of polio vaccines to prevent long-term preventable childhood disabilities.
- v. Advocacy visits to policy makers on the importance of children wellbeing
- vi. Provision of technical assistance to the production of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), a survey which ranked the status of children using multiple indicators in health, Education etc.
- vii. Provision of material and technical assistance toward the preparation of Child Right Act, and facilitated the passage into law through advocacy and sensitization of the various organs of government.
- viii. Provision of nutrition interventions to prevent stunting and wasting among some identified children.
- ix. Development of a draft Social Protection Policy for the state.
- x. Provision of technical and material assistance to the development of a draft Bayelsa state policy on food and nutrition, and the multi-sectoral plan for food and nutrition for the state
- xi. Provision of relief material to flood victims in the state.
- xii. Advocacy and sensitization on gender-based violence and violence against children
- xiii. Building the capacity of line ministries in the state on the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF)
- xiv. Assistance in the prevention of maternal mortality and prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDs.

UNICEF Support for Education:

The under listed programmes were implemented by Unicef to reduce the phenomenon of out-of- school children in the Niger Delta in the education sector. Specifically, it:

- i. Supported the federal Ministry of Education to develop a National Enrolment Drive Framework and reached over 820,000 through enrolment campaign in 2017.
- ii. Mapped out-of-school children and provided cash transfer to enable access to retention in schools.
- iii. Implemented minimum standards on safe schools in some states.
- iv. Developed a policy on gender in education, costed states gender plans and re-entry guidelines for girls.
- v. Developed guidelines for integration of Almamajiri children into formal primary schools.
- vi. Engaged traditional and religious leaders in 19 northern states and FCT to commit to reducing out-of-school children.
- vii. Established high-level women's groups in some states to advance for girls' education

Development:

Development could be viewed as a process that results in positive fundamental change in the socio-economic condition of a given society. The literature on development is extensive and varied as the concept is

perceived in different dimensions. It has evolved from being the problem of poorer countries to being a global problem. The linear perspective, the traditional economic growth perspective, conceived development as the capacity of a national economy whose initial economic condition has been more or less static for a long time, to generate and sustain an annual increase in its gross national product (GNP) at rates of perhaps 5% or more (Todaro and Smith, 2004). This was the dominant conception of development that was propounded by development theorists, and vendors of western liberalism in the early decades of development.

The experience of many developing countries were despite realizing such economic growth targets, the levels of living standard of the masses of people remained for the most part unchanged; this informed the conjecturing of a more comprehensive and people-centered view of development. Development came to be conceived as a multidimensional process involving major changes in social structures, popular attitudes, and national institutions, acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and the eradication of poverty. Contemporary perception of development entails a positive change in indicators such as the justice system, governance structure and even a fulfilling spiritual life.

Dudley (1973) noted that the question to ask about a country's development are: what is happening to poverty? what is happening to unemployment? what is happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels, then this has been a period of development for the country concerned. The World Bank which hitherto championed economic growth as the goals of development was also constrained to adopt a broader perspective of development. The 1999 *World Development Report* asserted that:

The Challenge of Development is to improve the quality of life. Especially in the world poorest countries, a better quality of life calls for higher incomes but it involves much more. It encompasses as end in themselves better education, higher standards of health and nutrition, less poverty, a cleaner environment, more equality of opportunity, greater

individual" (World Development Report, 1999:4).

Rodney (1972:9-30) also affirm that development in human society is a many-sided process. At the individual level, it implies increase skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. At the societal level, development means increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationship.

Similarly, Todaro and Smith (2004: 11) shifted from their GNP-based perspective and adopted a broad view of development thus:

Development must therefore be conceived as a multidimensional process including major changes in social structures, popular attitudes and national institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of poverty. Development in essence, must represent the whole gamut of change by which an entire social system turned to the diverse basic needs and desire of individuals and social groups within that system which moves away from a condition of life regarded as materially and spiritually better.

Amartya Sen, one of the leading scholar on the meaning of development, in his works *commodities and capabilities* (1985), and *Development as Freedom* (1999) argued that development has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives we lead and the freedom we enjoyed. These scholars identified and advanced three core values that should serve as a conceptual basis and practical guideline for understanding the inner meaning of development. These values are sustenance, the ability to meet basic needs such as food, health, shelter and protection, self-esteem, a sense of worth and self-respect of not being used as a tool by others for their own end and freedom from servitude, the sense of emancipation from alienating material conditions of life and from social servitude ignorance, misery, and dogmatic beliefs. (Gault, 1971: 89-96. Human Development Report 1992:20) conclusively posit that development is both a

physical reality and a state of mind in which society has through some combination of social, economic and institutional processes, secured the means of obtaining a better life. That whatever the specific components of this better life, development in all societies must have at least the following three objectives.

- i. To increase the availability and widen the distribution of basic life sustaining goods such as food, shelter, health and protection.
- ii. To raise levels of living including in addition to higher incomes, the provision of more jobs, better education and greater attention to cultural and human values all of which will serve to enhance materials wellbeing and generate greater individual and national self-esteem.
- iii. To expand the range of economic and social choices available to individuals and nations by freeing them from servitude and dependence not only in relations to other people and nation states but also to the forces of ignorance and human misery.

Therefore, development is progressional and non-static. This is because the development indicators and indices are changing with time, environment, and society and cross cultural contacts. As Shaida Badee rightly conjectured

The world of development statistics has grown larger and deeper. The demand for statistics to measure progress and demonstrate the effectiveness of development programs has stimulated growing interest in the production and dissemination of statistics. And not just in the traditional domains of debt, demographics, national accounts, but in the new areas such as biodiversity, information communications, technology and measures of government and business performance. In response world development indicators have continued to grow and change

In 1999, members of the statistical community, recognizing that the production of sound statistics for measuring progress is a global responsibility established the partnership in statistics for development

in the twenty first century (PARIS 21) to strengthen statistical capacity at all levels. The striving to elevate human life and comfort from a given level considered unsatisfactorily to a better and perhaps more comfortable level. Development, therefore may be conceptualized in terms of changes in the culture of a society from a level considered not or not less more satisfactory to a satisfactory or more satisfactory level. It would be apt to argue, therefore, that the reality of development is culture laden, having meaning and essence from the prevalent cultural standards and value in the society. The development values and norms in one culture may not necessarily be the same as in another society at the same time. The idea of trans-cultural development norms and values or global development indicators, goals and target contradicts the harmony and coherence sanctity of cultural diversities in the world. In this nexus, development now means endeavoring to imbibe and capacity to reflect the prevalent cultural status, habits norms and values of the dominant cultures of the world otherwise you are not developed.

Development in essence is a process that begins with the people ways of life through the improvement of their cultural values and norms thus, the general attitude of associating development with westernization, industrialization or capitalist growth is not justifiable. Ake, (1981:141) has rightly observed:

One important impulse for change in African economics is the desire for African leaders, apparently shared by their followers, for development. The desire for development might be described with equal accuracy as a passion or an ideology ... they see development of their economies as necessary condition for dealing decisively with these problems. That is how development has come to be an obsession in Africa, even though few are clear with what development is.

Ake noted that development has become an ideology, a western ideology in so far as African leaders conceptualize progress toward a better society and their historical evolution in terms of how to catch up with the possibility of achieving western style of development. The implication is that the reality of the phenomenon

described as development is made a mirage, and illusion and perhaps delusion to the recessive cultures in relation to the continued changes in the life styles, standards and values of the dominant cultures of the world as cultural standard of the dominant cultures are adopted and set as development goals. It should be noted that the development goals are usually set for the so called underdeveloped societies as such goals from available evidence from all the world development indicators published have been achieved by the dominant cultures from the onset. Consequently, the concept development has been reduced to a continued comparison of the cultures of the south with the dominant culture and imperial tendencies of the North. Therefore, the concept of development as presented and projected by contemporary scholarship tend to constitute a paradigm seeking to exalt the cultural dominance and superiority of the North and imbue a perception of inferiority of the people and cultures of the South with a perpetual scampering to imitate or catch up with the North.

Development is about application of knowledge and information to secure and sustain human comfort - the good life. Development as a concept entails power resources and capabilities. Therefore, it is susceptible to paradigm subjective and political manipulations. To this end, within this lense of contemporary political economy we adopt the holistic conceptualization of development as presented by Todaro and Smith, Seers, Rodney, Sen and other such exponents. But in the context of the third world experience we intend to define development as the continued striving and capacity to imbibe and live the life style, standards, norms and values of the North.

Theoretical Framework

Obasi (1991) explained that a theoretical framework is a tool for analyzing the underlying elements of a theory. It is a dynamic and indispensable explanatory device for linking the problem of study to a relevant theory. For one to explain clearly any social phenomenon, the phenomenon has to be explained within an appropriate theoretical framework.

However, Ake (1981:3) has observed that

...in most of the western social science that prevail in African institutions of higher learning, there is an unfortunate tendency toward obstruction in the explanation of social phenomenon.

In this light, the dependency theory approach was adopted in this study. The Dependency theory holds that the underdeveloped states are impoverished and the developed states are enriched by the way the poor states are integrated into the world capitalist system (Thomas, 2010 P156). He continued that underdeveloped states needed to delink their connectedness with the global capitalist system so that they could pursue a path more in keeping with their own needs, less dictated by external pressure. In other words, for the less developed countries (i.e. countries in the periphery) to succeed economically, they must detach from the global capitalist system controlled by the countries in the centre (the advanced economies). Specifically, countries in the periphery are the backward states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America while the advanced economies are developed countries of Western Europe, Britain and the United states. Thomas further asserts that the dependency theory is premised on the following:

- i. Wealthy nations enjoy their current standard of living because poor nations provide natural resources, cheap labour and market for the developed countries to sustain such high standard of living.
- ii. Wealthy nations employ economics, the media, politics, banking and finance, education, culture etc to perpetuate such influence over the poor nations.
- iii. Wealth nations deploy economic sanctions or military force to counter attempts by dependent nations to resist such dominance.

The basic thrust of the dependency theory is that European and the U.S. development was predicated on the active underdevelopment of the third world (Peet & Hartwick, 2009). It entails brutal conquest, colonial control, stripping non-western societies of their people, resources and surpluses (Galeano, 1973 cited in Peet & Hartwick).

This theory gives us an insight to understand the phenomenon of out-of-school children because an

educational system tied to or dependent on western educational system that is at variance with African institutional settings will not achieve the desired outcome for the development of Africa (Ake, 1982).

3. Methodology

This section of the paper provides a description of the sources of data used and the applicable methodology. Thus, this study relied on secondary sources of data (textbooks, published articles, journals, internet materials, etc) and descriptive qualitative analysis based on content analysis. Emphasis was placed on the concept of out of school children and the functions of the United Nations Children Education fund across states in the Niger Delta.

4. Results and Discussion

Out-Of-School Children

UNESCO defines *out-of-school children* as children who never started formal schooling and children who started school but later dropped out. This implies children in the official age range who are not enrolled in either primary or secondary schools.

The statistics for out-of-school children in Nigeria and globally is alarming. The United Nations education scientific and cultural organization (UNESCO) put the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria at 20 million while the global figure stood at 244 million. Unicef (2023) statistics indicates that 1 in 3 children are out of school in Nigeria with 10.2 million at the primary level and 8.1 million at the Junior secondary (JSS) school level. The same statistics shows that 12.4 million children never attended school and 5.9 million left school early.

Globally, Nigeria is ranked second to India in countries with highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC). The percentage distribution of OOSC in Nigeria revealed that 33% are from the North East, 26% from the North Central, 25% from the North West, 22% from the South West, 24% from the South South and 19% from the South East (Ogunode, Adamu and Njoku, 2022).

The Cable,ng (January 11, 2023) quoted the Governor of Bayelsa state Senator Douye Diri as stating that the state has a population of 250,000 out- of-school children during the inauguration of national campaign of Out-of-school children (OOSC.).

Causes of Out-Of-School Children in Nigeria:

A. Poor government policies

Insufficient budgetary allocation to the education sector is a major cause of the OOSC. Most states in the federation failed to meet the UNESCO's minimum 25% budgetary allocation to education. In some instances, funds released for education purpose are diverted by corrupt government officials (Josiah & Ajape, 2021).

B. Religious beliefs and cultural resistance.

This problem is minimal in the southern part of Nigeria but common in the North. (Adenuga et.al 2022) asserts that:

The Northern part of the country is constituted by the majority of Muslims whose religion is pivotal to identity and way of life. As such, it is common for parents to prefer qur'anic education to public schools. Unfortunately, these schools are not designed to teach secular subjects that equip the student with fundamental numeracy and literacy skills, let alone basic sciences and civic education... the South East and the South South were known for out-of-school boy phenomenon. This is attributable to the norm of preference of trade apprenticeship over female schooling which makes parents withdraw their boy child from school at an early age to join the labour market. It is believed that entrepreneurship promises better economic benefits than the uncertainty of employment after female education.

C. Poverty

This is a major source of out-of-school children. Nigeria is rich in natural resources but governance deficit has resulted into high incidence of poverty. The current inflationary pressure in the country emanating from the removal of fuel subsidy has thrown many families below the poverty line and may likely exacerbate the already high rate of out-of-school children.

D. Poor implementation of the Child Right Act.

The right to education is enshrined in the Child Rights Act. However, many states especially in the core northern region foot dragged on the passage of this very important act. When it is finally passed into law, implementation issue presents another challenge. The issue of child marriage still persists in certain parts of the country and is a known factor in out-of-school children syndrome.

E. Conflicts:

Inter-tribal conflicts are common in Nigeria and is a major contributory factor to out-of-school children. Crises often lead to displacement and relocation. This affects the means of livelihood of the victims resulting

to school drop outs. In the Niger Delta, the agitation for resource control led to displacement of communities while in the South East the agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) produced a major social dislocation. The south west is not exempted from this crisis. Another conflict that impacted negatively on the social order is the herder-farmer conflict and the resultant loss of lives and property. The biggest contributor to out-of-school children in Nigeria is the Boko Haram crises in the North East. This conflict produced the highest number of out-of-school children. The picture in the Niger Delta is not much different from that of the North.

Table 1: Below shows the total children attending primary school, the percentage that are male and female, the total number of out-of-school children and the percentage that are female in the Niger Delta.

| States | Total % of children attending primary school | Total % of out-of-school children | % of attending primary school that are male | Out of school children that are male | % of children attending primary school that are Female | Out of school children that are Female |
|--------------|--|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Akwa Ibom | 28.8 | 6.6 | 36.5 | 6.3 | 22.3 | 6.8 |
| Bayelsa | 27.0 | 5.7 | 27.0 | 8.4 | 28.9 | 3.0 |
| Cross/Rivers | 25.0 | 4.7 | 21.6 | 5.1 | 29.1 | 4.1 |
| Delta | 23.4 | 10.9 | 24.7 | 12.9 | 22.1 | 9.1 |
| Edo | 26.9 | 5.0 | 24.0 | 6.0 | 29.1 | 4.3 |
| Rivers | 16.5 | 5.5 | 18.6 | 8.3 | 14.0 | 2.1 |

Source: 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS).

We can glean from the above data that Akwa-Ibom State had the highest percentage of children attending primary school (28.8%) while Delta State posted the highest number of out-of-school children (10.9%) compared to the percentage attending school. On the other hand, Cross Rivers State recorded the lowest number of out-of-school children with 4.7%.

By Gender disaggregation, Delta State recorded the highest number of out-of-school children that are male with 12.9% while Edo State had the least number of out-of-school children that are male with 6.0%. Furthermore, Delta State still obtained the highest number of out-of-school children that are female with 9.1% whereas Rivers State posted the least number of male children that are out-of-school with 2.1%.

4.1 Implications and Threats from Out-Of-School Children

The likely implications from a high out-of-school children (OOSC) is the socio-economic effects on the society. Ogunode et.al 2022 itemized the impacts of OOSC children to include the following:

- i. Future security threat to the nation
- ii. Shortage of skilled manpower in the future
- iii. High level of illiteracy
- iv. Child marriage and pregnancy

5. Recommendations

From our study on the of out-school-children in the Niger Delta, we recommend the following to stem the menace:

1. **Sensitization:** Sensitization on the importance of education is key to reducing the problem of out-of-school children. A sensitization process implemented in the rural areas would be more effective since a reasonable proportion of out-of-school children are resident in the rural areas. An all-inclusive process that involves the traditional rulers, community opinion leaders, women groups, religious leaders would be more optimal. In addition, the use of mass media especially in English and the local languages would also be an effective tool for both rural and urban out-of-school children.
2. **Improved security in the schools:** Security challenge is a major factor in out-of-school children. Community policing would play a significant role in reducing out-of-school children. Furthermore, a strong synergy between the conventional security agencies and vigilante groups in addition to adequate incentives for security operatives would also help to reduce the problem of out-of-school children. A strong partnership would lead to strong outcome.
3. **Monitoring:** The government should design and implement a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system to track school enrolment for children of school age. Also, effective budget monitoring should be put in place to prevent diversion of funds programmed for educational development.
4. **Cash transfer:** States and local governments should encourage social intervention in the form of conditional cash transfer tied to school enrolment. Unicef implemented cash transfer in some northern states to encourage school enrolment. Other states should also key to this form of intervention to support the federal government cash transfer programme.
5. **Enforcement of child right act:** There should be strict enforcement of the child right act to improve school enrolment
6. **Re-orientation:** A re-orientation drive should be put in place to sensitize religious leaders on the negative effect of out-of-school children. The mosques and churches should take the lead role.

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