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**UTILIZATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF INCLUSIVENESS,
CHILD- PARTICIPATION AND GENDER EQUITY IN ACHIEVING
MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDGs)**

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Abstract

The issue of achieving vision 20-20-20 has been on the top burner as far as Nigeria is concerned. How to realize it has become a matter of concern to stakeholders in all sectors of the economy, education inclusive. Closely related to this is also the question of how Nigeria can achieve the Education for All (EFA) by 2015 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as the achievement of these goals will chart the course of actualizing vision 20-20-20. To achieve these goals, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Education proposed the Learning Plus Initiative (LPI) whose cross-cutting themes are all-inclusive education, child participation and gender equity. This paper examines the utilization of the principles of all-inclusiveness, participation and gender equity in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), rationale and strategies for child inclusion, participation and gender equity.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are for 192 United Nation member states who have agreed to achieve by the year 2015. The objective of the Millennium Development Goals is to improve social and economic conditions in the world's poorest countries. These goals, eight in number were derived from earlier international development targets and were officially established following the

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Millennium summit in the year 2000, by the world leaders present at the summit and adopted by the United Nations Millennium Declaration Committee headed by Jeffrey Sachs.

The global disorder, social displacement, economic depression and increasing rate of poverty in many countries of the world especially developing countries, necessitated the action of some heads of state and governments to declare war against all world's problems that will not make life bearable for the citizenry (African Ministers of Health Conference, 2005). The eight goals as earlier noted are meant to be pursued individually and collectively by each country and continent of the world (World Education Forum, 2000).

The eight goals of MDGs as enumerated by the UN are to:

- i. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger,
- ii. Achieve Universal Primary Education,
- iii. Promote gender equality and women empowerment,
- iv. Reduce child mortality,
- v. Improve maternal health care,
- vi. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases,
- vii. Ensure environmental sustainability and
- viii. Develop a Global Partnership for development.

In order to achieve these goals, each nation of the world was mandated to develop policies and programmes within their various countries to aid the speedy execution of the MDGs target. As a follow-up in Africa, the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) came on board for each African nation for collaboration in the development of local policies and programmes in line with the United Nations directive. NEPAD's major objectives from where other African Nations have to draw up their programmes include:

- i. Development and Political Governance,
- ii. Economic Governance and Management,
- iii. Corporate Governance and
- iv. Social-Economic Development.

Nigeria on her part established the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). To ensure the success of the programme each state and local government were directed to key into the programme. This of courses gave rise to State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) and Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS). NEEDS objectives include the following: Wealth creation, Value Reorientation, Poverty reduction and Employment generation.

Education is one of the major driving tools in the achievement of all the goals as enumerated by the United Nations. The Federal Ministry of Education (FME) on its part

as a Federal Government organ responsible for the formulation of the country's educational policies was therefore mandated to put in place several programmes as a strategy to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

However, gaps still exist between current policies that are aimed at achieving these goals and the implementation of the policies. To this effect, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in collaboration with FME proposed the Learning Plus Initiative (LPI) as part of quality education, care and protection for children infected and affected by HIV & AIDS and other factors such as poverty, all forms of discrimination, violence, abuse, mismanagement of resources and so on. In recognition of the importance of education as a vehicle for change and the roles played by children as the future of any nation, the schools and Alternative Learning Centres (ALC) where children spend most of their time for learning purposes are being targeted as channels for delivering essential services. (African Ministers of Health Conference, 2005).

In Nigeria, there exist disparities between gender and geographical locations which pose a challenge to the attainment of the MDGs. Thus, to ensure quality basic education for all children, as proposed by the MDGs agenda, UNICEF developed the Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) model, based on child participation, all-inclusiveness and gender-sensitive philosophy of education. This model also promotes a healthy and protective environment for learners. Hence, this paper focuses on the utilization of the principles of all-inclusiveness, child participation and gender equity in the achievement of Millennium Development Goals, rationale and strategies for child inclusion, participation and gender equity.

Concept of Learning Plus Initiative.

The concept of Learning Plus Initiative (LPI) was proposed by UNICEF which derives its meaning from the concept of quality Education. Quality Education according to UNICEF (2007) is the education which is inclusive of all populations, especially the most vulnerable; seeks the participation of stakeholders of all constituencies and ensures gender equity in the short and long term. UNICEF also postulated that a quality basic education will better equip children with the knowledge and skills needed to adopt healthy lifestyles, to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. It is also aimed at enabling children to play active roles in social, economic and political decision-making as they transit from adolescence to adulthood" (UNICEF, 2007). Learning Plus Initiative means what stakeholders need to do outside the traditional teaching and learning to assist vulnerable learners. Vulnerability in this sense refers to learners with special needs like physically/mentally challenged, gifted/talented, migrant fishermen, migrant farmers, Fulani cattle rearers, orphans, children living with terminally or chronically ill parent(s) and children who hawk on the streets.

The singular purpose of the Learning Plus Initiative is to intensify the systematic use of schools as integrated centres of learning and for the delivery of other social services for children's care and support in circumstances where the normal provision of

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these services by families and communities have come under increased threat from major challenges. Learning Plus strategy and action include child-friendly schooling, School fees abolition, essential learning packages, life skills-based education, HIV/AIDS campaign and partnerships (FME, 2010).

The key issues that UNICEF emphasizes in determining the quality of education in any nation are the issue of all-inclusiveness, child participation and gender equity, Child inclusion, participation and gender equity have therefore become major cross-cutting issues in Learning Plus Initiative, if any nation is to achieve qualitative education which is a road map to the achievement of the MDGs as put forward by UNICEF (2007), that nation must as a matter of concern make her education all-inclusive at all level. An emerging issue that readily comes to mind as it concerns the Nigerian educational system is whether it is really qualitative or not. The question is: Does every learner irrespective of race, tribe and class benefit from the educational service?

Child inclusion as a major concept in Learning Plus implies that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusion in this regard is a philosophy and inclusive education is a process leading towards institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs' (UNESCO, 1994). All children in a given community should learn together regardless of their backgrounds, ethnicity, religion, gender, HIV/AIDS status, impairments, challenges and abilities. It is a rights'-based approach and a social model in which the system adapts to the child through appropriate curricula, infrastructural arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use, commitment and partnerships with their communities (Hunt, Alwell, Farron-Davis and Goetz, 1996). Inclusive education involves thinking and restructuring policies, curricula, cultures and practices in schools and learning environments so that diverse learning needs can be met, whatever the origin or nature of those needs are.

Child participation on the other hand as noted by Popoola (2011) is a consideration for children in taking vital decisions concerning their education; involvement in decisions having to do with their education; regular feed-back to children on issues relating to learning and active engagement of children in the teaching-learning process. UNICEF (2007) however defines child participation as children influencing issues affecting their lives by speaking out or taking action in partnership with adults.

Child-participation according to the United Nations (1991) involved encouraging and enabling children to make their views known on the issues that affect them, with adults listening to children as they demonstrate the freedom to express themselves in their multiple and varied ways of communicating so that adults need to take their views into account when coming to decisions that affect the children.

Gender equity which is the last cross-cutting theme in Learning Plus Initiative according to Dada (2011), referred to the principle and practice of fair and impartial allocation of resources and distribution of opportunities to both females and males. It is important to note here that emphasis is laid on gender equality which according to UNICEF (2007) specifies that there should not be any discrimination based on a person's sex in granting access to services, benefits and other resources.

Rationale for Child Inclusion, Participation and Gender Equity

Child inclusion is a matter of Human rights, as all children no matter their abilities or constraints are entitled to education (UN, 1991). Children should therefore not be discriminated against by being excluded or sent away because of their disabilities (Hunt, Farron-Davis, Wrenn, Hirose-Hatae and Goetz, 1997). Children belong together and have no need to be protected from each other just as disabled adults, describing themselves as special school survivors, advocate for an end to segregation.

Children do better academically and socially in integrated settings. There is no teaching or care in a segregated school which cannot take place in a regular school. Given commitment and support, inclusive education is a more efficient use of education resources.

Segregation teaches children to be fearful, ignorant and breeds prejudice. All children need an education that will help them develop relationships and prepare them for life in the mainstream. Only inclusion has the potential to reduce fear and build friendship, respect and understanding.

United Nations (1991) stipulated that child participation is a right. The child should have the freedom of expressing his/her view or preferring not to do so; children should be perceived as active players in the learning process and not just as the recipient of knowledge; children can no longer be perceived as not-yet persons, waiting to become mature by the magic effect of reaching the age of maturity; children can no longer be considered or treated as passive recipients of care or of adult's decisions; the relationships between adults and children need to change with parents, teachers, care givers and others interacting with children such that they evolve from mere providers, protectors or advocates to negotiators and facilitators; respecting the view of the child means that he/she should not be ignored and it also means that the child's opinion should not be automatically endorsed.

The principles of child participation according to Popoola (2011), include the following:

Voluntary: Children should never be forced to participate, answer any question, or join any activities if they do not want to do so.

Informed: Children and their guardians (for children under age 18) should be informed about the background, purpose, risks and possible outcomes of their participation before they can decide whether or not to participate.

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Meaningful: child-participation should have a realistic and constructive purpose that benefits children. Children's participation should first and foremost benefit those who are involved.

Respectful: participating children should feel that their contributions or opinions are valued and their comments are listened to.

Safe: the activities, venue or methodologies used should not put children or adults in danger of physical, psychological or emotional harm.

Dada (2011), observed that gender equity is an approach to progressively redress the severe gender gaps and disadvantages created based on gender. It is an advocacy tool to encourage the increased access, retention, completion and performance of the girl child to Basic Education. Above all, gender equity is a platform to get Government commitment and sustained effort in resources mobilization, allocation and utilization to actualize the MDGs target for gender equity and a way to make us recognize that girl child possesses the same kind of potential as the boy child and can contribute to national development in all aspects of social, economic and political heights.

Strategies for Child Inclusion, Participation and Gender Equity

One major strategy that can be adopted for effective and all-inclusive education, child participation and gender equity is advocacy. That is ensuring an overwhelming political commitment from all stakeholders who have the authority and power to influence a drastic paradigm change in social values regarding the value of child inclusion, participation and gender equity. The International HIV/AIDS Alliance (2001) defined advocacy as a process which brings about change in the policies, laws and practices of influential individuals, groups and institutions". There are three levels of advocacy which can be used to bring about inclusion in the Nigerian educational system, they are; sensitization, which is creating awareness, improving acceptance and reducing stigmatization of Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC). The second is counselling which addresses academic, vocational and psychosocial issues and related concerns while the third is networking and collaboration with local and international organizations that will assist in the actualization of the Millennium Development Goals.

Popoola, (2011), noted that the likely barriers to child inclusion and participation are attitudinal, traditional, social, cultural and religious beliefs and practices, while Dada (2011) agreeing with Popoola's (2011) assertion added that factors hindering equitable access of gender to Basic Education include: Gender insensitive instructional materials, Gender blind curriculum, Girls-unfriendly school infrastructure, Skewed female-male teachers ratios, Gender bias attitudes against girls and sexual harassment/ gender-based violence against girls. These hindrances affect the full utilization of principles of all-inclusiveness, child participation and gender equity in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. Interestingly, Nigeria is one of the member nations pursuing its objective through educational sensitization- where all stakeholders need to be committed to using available resources and mobilization.

Conclusion

Utilization of the principles of all-inclusiveness, child participation and gender equity can be hardly attained without the involvement of education as a tool for the all-round development of children irrespective of tribe, socioeconomic background, political affiliation, or physical incapacitation, disabilities, emotional or other circumstances not mentioned here. Education has been on a top priority list in Nigeria since her independence till date and all children need inclusive education that would provide opportunities for emotional support, helping to develop relationships, friendships, respect and understanding which prepare them for future living. Children should be listened to by parents, teachers and adults as they express their views. The study has examined the need to develop capacity-building initiatives among children by interaction to reduce vulnerability to poverty and HIV/AIDS through advocacy that brings about change in the policies, laws and practices of those who are in the position of authorities to enable children to benefit. Children should not be discriminated against as child-inclusiveness emanates from human right laws that children are entitled to education according to the UN (1991). Hence, all inclusion, participation and gender equity call for enhanced access to education for all children without segregation or constraints to achieve MDGs.

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