

## The Ecological and Occupational Dimensions to Contemporary Educational Disparities in Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the ecological and occupational dimensions as factors responsible for the disparities in educational development in Nigeria because these factors have often been neglected when discussing causes of inequalities in educational development. It employed the analytical approach as its method of explaining how ecological and occupational forces have caused educational disparities in Nigeria. It concludes that patterns of settlement and the jobs people do, do affect their chances to education.

### INTRODUCTION

The need to monitor and study the patterns of educational development in Nigeria became much more felt in Nigeria after the Nigerian civil war. Inability to monitor the trend in the past had often resulted in conflicts due to struggles for power sharing which is a product of educational imbalance. Obokoh (1992) claimed that the Nigerian civil war was caused by high level of disparity in educational development between the north and south of Nigeria. Of much interest today is the fact that educational disparity in Nigeria cannot be said to exist on north and south basis alone. Disparities exist within states and region in terms of educational growth. A careful analysis of regional issues would reveal the extent of differences within a single territorial unit and would bring out inequalities which would not show up in macro analysis on a national level or within the political frame work of a sovereign state (Furter 1980). On monitoring disparities in educational development in Nigeria, it has been noted that previous studies traced its cause to history of development, political factors, economic needs and the multi-ethnic / multi-cultural nature of the country. Other studies have blamed the cause on the Federal Government of Nigeria for making unequal provisions for educational growth in Nigeria for all territories. However, a careful analysis has shown that no attention has been paid to the ecological and occupational factors as being possible causes of educational disparities in Nigeria. It is for this reason therefore, that

this paper sets out to examine the ecological and occupational dimensions to contemporary educational disparity in Nigeria. In order to achieve the above, the paper employed the analytical approach as its research method. This method was preferred for this study because it will enable the researcher to critically analyse how ecological and occupational factors could affect educational development in Nigeria. Since the method does emphasise clarity, it will also enable the reader to understand how the researcher arrived at his conclusion (Aluede, 1998; Aluede, 1999).

### EFFECTS OF ECOLOGY AND OCCUPATION ON EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Ecology has been defined by Ezewu (1997) and Hornby (2000) as a scientific study of the pattern of relations or interactions between people, plants, animals and their physical environments. Ezewu went further to explain that ecology has a determining factor on human behaviour, their occupation, aspirations and educational practices; which can be termed here as the extent of their educational development. This is the pointer to the possible effect of ecological factor on educational disparity in Nigeria, since humans take on different patterns of life styles as environment may dictate from time to time. (Eggleson, 1977).

In Nigeria, the following ethnic groups have had doses of the effect of ecology on educational growth. The groups are the Fulanis that

constitute 8.6% of Nigeria's population or a figure of 4,784 millions, the Ijaws with a population of 1,089 millions or 2.0% and the Igbiras with a population of 0.426 million or 0.8% of the nation's population (Aluede 1999). These groups of people have imparted on their eco-system to the extent that movement to other lands have become a necessary measure for survival. Specifically, the Fulanis who are predominantly animal rearers needed fresh or new land for grazing after utilizing that in their own environment. The Ijaws needed new fishing areas after they exhausted what they had and the Igbiras on their part needed fertile lands to farm on after they had over utilized their local habitat, thus turning it fallow. The implication of this is that the ecological setting of the ethnic groups identified above compelled them to move from one place to another in-search of either grazing land, as is the case of the Fulanis, or fishing areas for the Ijaws, or fertile land for the Igbiras or other movements as their occupations determined.

It should be noted, that the movements of ethnic groups identified to have been caused by either ecological or occupational factors above, had implications for educational advancement. This is so because in many situations, educational facilities and provisions could not be as mobile as the people they were expected to serve. Ezewu (1997) looked at the case of those in the riverine areas who are mostly Ijaws and suggested that they should be considered as special citizens in the country and therefore, should be treated specially. Although it is not intended in this paper to make a case of justification of claims, the fact is that the people live in very difficult areas. This has affected their communication, transportation, occupation, and access to education for themselves and their children. It should be noted that while there has been a general outcry that the riverine areas appears neglected in the provision of educational facilities, the few ones provided are often abandoned by children who, as a result of parental occupations, abandon schools to follow their parents to fish in the high Sea and further into the interior, where educational facilities are not available. This has made it difficult for them to benefit from the normal school programmes.

In the same vein, the Fulanis move from a distance of over five hundred kilometers from far north to down south to graze their animals. The movements are such that wives, children

and animals are involved. The implication of this is that the children are denied access to schools. The alternative measure has been the introduction of nomadic schools established along the routes of the nomads to enable their children to receive education at the point they settle. This measure has often met with many problems as their animals have often destroyed crops of natives. The natives in reaction have often burnt down the camps of the Fulanis and their nomadic schools to compel them to leave their environment.

Worse hit, are the Igbiras, whose peculiar problem is not gaining the required attention or recognition in the scheme of things. While it is true that the case of the Fulanis and the Ijaws have been recognized by the Federal Government of Nigeria, that of the Igbiras has not received any appreciable attention and recognition. The Igbiras or mobile farmers case is peculiar because their movements are not easily noticeable when viewed from a global perspective. It should however be noted that the Igbiras are often on the move in search of fertile lands to farm on. They move with their families and since the farming season determines their time of movement, they are often not able to benefit from the normal school system. They often have to learn the language of their host community before their children could benefit from the educational programmes available in their locale. In most cases, the need for movement will arise before they settle fully in their "so called" new environment. The situation has remained the same for this people for many years.

In the case of the Fulanis, the Federal Government of Nigeria gave attention to their problems by establishing nomadic schools. The results of government efforts aimed at helping the Fulanis are being seen. The Fulanis themselves are happy about the attention being given to them and are willing to benefit from the programme. Other Nigerians are aware that the Fulanis needed the kind of attention they are being given and as a result, are not doing anything to counter the good effects of the programme. In the case of the migrant fishermen or the Ijaws, discussions centered on strategies the various governments could adopt to help provide them educational institutions putting into account their peculiar occupation are taking place. The states concerned are paying great attention to the peculiar needs of their people

and the Federal Government of Nigeria is currently mapping out strategies to come to the aid of the Ijaws, by providing funds for them to run special education programmes, that will not interfere with their occupations. The Igbiras for now appears to be the group that is not receiving the desired attention from the Federal Government of Nigeria.

### WHAT COULD BE DONE

From our study, it is clear that the three ethnic groups discussed above are always on the move as a result of ecological and or occupational pressure. However, they cannot be on the move for ever because, Nigeria's growing civilization and economy will not accommodate this kind of movement in the near future. There is now effective occupation of territories. Building and industries are taking over vast land mass. There is therefore the need to attend to the problems of the Fulanis, Ijaws, and Igbiras, to enable them have a settled pattern of life. To this end, the following suggestions are made.

There is the need to educate the Fulanis on land use and management. They should be educated to help nature by planting grasses and using their animal drops to fertilize the land so that the grasses can grow well with the manure and water, and if the lands are properly shared out, and animals are rotated on their grazing land, farmers will have grasses to feed their animals through out the year and this will reduce movements and clashes with host communities drastically. The present situation where nothing is being done to grow grasses needed to feed the animals will not help the Fulanis to live a settled pattern of life that is needed under the new dispensation.

The Ijaws need to be educated to have fish ponds and arrange the period of their fishing expeditions in such a way that it will allow their children to benefit from the school programmes being provided by the government. Camp settlements could be encouraged; in which case, government responsibility will be that of ensuring educational provisions and facilities are provided at the camps, while it will be the responsibility of the parents to ensure that their children attend schools provided at the camps.

The Igbiras should be educated to use fertilizers and crop rotation as a way of using land for longer periods than they are currently

doing. They should also be taught the various ways of turning fallow lands to be fertile and good for cultivation.

The Federal Government of Nigeria should embark on mass mobilization. The various groups should be enlightened to know the need for education. If the people are made to know the importance of education in an advancing nation, the people will go for it no matter the cost. The government should provide job opportunities for those that have gone through the school system so that others on seeing the new life for those that got employment after training in schools will be encouraged to go to school.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to focus on three ethnic groups namely the Fulanis, Ijaws, and the Igbiras that have been observed to be mobile as a result of their ecological problems and their occupations. They appear to be moving in the opposite direction to the facilities being provided for educational advancement by the various governments. This had made them to be educationally disadvantaged since they are not progressing at the same level with their immediate neighbours. Since educational disparity is capable of causing conflict amongst nation states, measures aimed at helping the ethnic groups discussed above to live a settled pattern of life that will help them benefit from educational programmes being provided were suggested. These are in addition to special educational programmes that are already being targeted at the people. It should however be noted that the people need enlightenment programmes for them to appreciate the need for education. This will help to eradicate illiteracy among the migrant: Fulanis; (nomads), the migrant fishermen – Ijaws and the mobile farmers – the Igbiras, and enable them compete favourably with their neighbours in the struggle for power sharing in the nation's politics.

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