

THE SECURITY OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT SINCE 1960*

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between development and security has attracted a healthy dose of scholarship since Robert Mc Namara set it on steam. With the Brundtland Report, the conceptualization of development acquired an almost perfect adjective – “sustainable” – which linked the present and the future in an unbroken tapestry. However, scholarship appears unsuccessful in integrating the Brundtland Report within the framework of McNamara’s thesis. Indeed, an exclusive relationship between the security and sustainable development appears scanty in existing literature. The subject even suffers an almost complete negligence when the security of children is considered in the geographical domain of third world countries. The paper sets out to remedy this neglect by examining the link between the security of the Nigerian child and sustainable development in Nigeria. It addresses the security of the Nigerian child as an independent subset of human security in Nigeria.

Keywords: Security, Sustainable Development, Nigerian Child, Child Security, Human Security

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature on the Nigerian child but they represent roughly the last twenty five years since Nigeria's independence. This might not be unconnected with the fervor in the run up to The Child's Right Convention of 1989. The Child's Right Convention was not an innovation in the study of the child. If anything, the concert was a reaffirmation of the natural and inalienable rights of the child as the bedrock of present and future development, symbolic of progress. However, progress in the growth and development of literature on the Nigerian child, cannot be said for the first twenty five years since Nigeria's independence. For the most part it was a period of nadir for the Nigerian child. This reason, perhaps among others, should not account for the neglect this period has garnered over the years. The study of this nature would not only help us understand the present, it will help us unearth areas to be explored as we embark on studying an important stage in human development in Nigeria.

WHY FOCUS A STUDY ON THE NIGERIAN CHILD?

No volume of literature can dispel the importance of studying about the child. As a popular expression says, "as the child goes, so goes the nation." Notwithstanding the expression, it is a fact that the growth and development from childhood to adulthood is a simulacrum on the growth and development of the nation. The development of a child is most times suggestive of the development of a state as a purposeful hyperbole. As a result, and in some circles, there is yet another expression suggesting that Nigeria so far, is a maladjusted child because of its palpable dysfunctional growth and development.

But there are economic, political and even social reasons that are compelling and unassailable for the study of the child. A proper study, and effective management of childhood, transforms into a relatively decent adult life. Economically, increased productivity over a lifetime and cost savings in health care, remedial education, rehabilitation are inherent gains emanating from it. On the social realm as well, early intervention would help minimize disparities such as gender inequality and cultural practices that are largely based on ignorance. Politically, policies, policy makers, policy implementers and, indeed, the image of the country in the global world rely on the competence of its people which are nurtured early in life. In terms of security, which this paper glides upon, the security of the child is linked to the preservation of the state's future.

METHODOLOGY ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD

Arguably, constructing or reconstructing the history of the Nigerian child is a daunting endeavor. Prominent in this difficulty is the lack of literature at least for the first two decades after independence. It is very likely that the lack of literature may be a carryover from the British occupation which largely did not have interest in the study and propagation of the Nigerian child. Even when mention is made on their establishment of homes, especially in Northern Nigeria, for the housing of children at the turn of the twentieth century, it was principally done in connection with stamping out slavery which was not a viable enterprise for Europe at the time. As it has been documented, those homes were hurriedly shut down once the financial implication began to bite the colonial economy (Ubah, 1993). Furthermore, there were a few smattering of laws such as the Children and Young Persons Law of 1934 which was revised in 1958 (UNICEF, 2000). But all these laws were meant to fight crime, control the child and not about propagating the welfare and development of the child.

This lack of literature followed through into the 1960s and 1970s until a corner was turned by the middle of the third decade after independence. A couple of reasons account for this anomaly. In the immediate aftermath of independence the country's attention was directed on the structuring of the nation and all other issues concerning the joining of the comity of nations. Before long, the country was embroiled in a debilitating civil war that finally found her in the 1970's trying to reconcile, reconstruct and rehabilitate. Although these challenges are not particularly convincing for the lack of interest on the child, they were compelling enough to distract the policy makers and implementers. Rummaging through the documents of the first two decades, the researcher is introduced mainly to the laws that affect children such as: The Penal Code-Laws of Northern Nigeria 1963; The Labour Code-Law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; The 1975 Decree 34- Indian Hemp (Amendment) Decree to mention but a few.

Another reason for the lack of literature in the first two decades after independence was the lack of advocacy from international organizations and non governmental agencies. For instance, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which was initially set up as International Children's Emergency Fund (ICEF) in 1946 was made a permanent agency within the United Nations in 1953. UNICEF was just coming of age and there were other nations of the world in Asia, South America, Europe and Africa with which to contend (UNICEF, 2000).

Other than the lack of literature, there is the other problem of statistics-laden document. Wherever it is found, most of the Literature on the Nigerian child tend to be inundated with statistics. While it is important to have numbers so as to plan well, those numbers need to be lucidly interpreted or explained even to the non professional in child related or statistical issues. But the most important statistic, the population of Nigerian children is lacking with respect to the first twenty five years since independence. There was a census in 1963 which gave a glimmer on the number of children in the country. But for planning purposes and considering the constant demographic variables of fertility, mortality and migration, no other acceptable number was utilized for policy planning until 1991. The 1973 census numbers had "various fraudulent devices for the inflation of figures, the magnitude of which is unbelievable" (Ademola, 1975). The Chairman of the Population Commission, two years after the fraud could not be corrected, observed that "... the primary and the supervisory enumerators in the field did not work for a National Cause and the interest of the country is not in their hearts, it is difficult to get a good census" (Ademola, 1975: vii). Thus, as the interest of Nigeria was undermined, so was the interest of the Nigerian child sabotaged. However, what we do know is that by the 1991 census, the zero to nineteen years of age bracket belong to about fifty-six per cent of the entire population of approximately ninety million citizens (NPC, 1991).

Furthermore, data collection, either by the National Population Commission or any other relevant agency tend to be elitist. They talk of households, birth registration, number of schools and the likes but do not appreciate in full some cultural nuances and inhibitions such as the peripatetic lifestyles of some ethnic groups and the morbid fear of modernization such as giving details about oneself or the family. In this regard, there is a great risk of an over count or under count.

There is also the challenge of perspectives in the study of the child. Some age brackets in the age range of children, especially the most vulnerable in their formative years cannot properly express themselves. It is left for the adult to do so and most of the times it is what the adults think and not what the child needs that subsist. Oftentimes, the rapid development in that age bracket is so transient that from the time of the adult findings and implementation, the child may have grown into adulthood and would not benefit fully from the needs of the child.

Above all, there is a problem of definition and description on who is a child. The internationally accepted norm, including the United Nations definition is eighteen years of age and below. However, the National Welfare Policy, the International Labour Organisation and Nigeria's Labour Decree cresting on the issue of employment consider fifteen years and under as an apt definition of a child (Adidu, 1994). So, the conundrum here is that the United Nations which holds the position of age eighteen has the youth age going from fifteen to twenty four (Nosworthy, 2001). With this overlap, and considering cultural perceptions and perspectives, it is fair to say that the definition of a child is functional. But for our purpose, eighteen years will be used.

Notwithstanding the imprecise definition of a child, there are problems of description. For instance you have designations such as infant, minor, juvenile, teenager and adolescence. Although these designations and classification are prevalent in legal discourse, they help complicate the various approaches to the study of the child. But when all is said, the early years of a child are crucial.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF CHILDHOOD

No history of a child would be worth its salt without discussing the earliest years of a child's life. It appears that for the greater part of the first two decades those years were neglected in policies, programmes and budgets of Nigeria. Studies have shown that most brain developments take place before a child reaches three years of age. During this time, "... brain cells of a new infant proliferate, synapses crackle and the patterns of a lifetime are established. In a short 36 months, children develop their abilities to think and speak, learn and reason and lay the foundation for their values and social behaviour as adults (UNICEF, 2000). During this delicate dance of life, "...every touch, movement and emotion in a young child's life translates into an explosion of electrical and chemical activity in the brain, as billions of cells are organizing themselves into networks requiring trillions of synapses between them" (UNICEF, 2000). As much as a child's brain is not a blank slate with pre-set programmes to be written on it, early intervention such as good nutrition, good health, clean water and a decent environment help the dance between the genes and the environment.

A caveat, however, must be entered here. It is imperative for our study to understand that child health is not synonymous with child development. If anything, survival, as in health, go side by side with development. It is one occurring after the other.

Post Independence Security of the Nigerian Child and the Civil War Years

An outline on the history of the Nigerian child would be appropriate from the 1960s since the years before that was during the over one hundred years of British-led European occupation. Earlier than that, the studies would amount to the study of the various ethnic groups that make up modern day Nigeria and their attitude to children.

Mention had been made that the 1960's was an era of nadir for the Nigerian child. Articulated government policies were lacking and advocacy from international organisations and non-governmental groups was virtually non-existent. Immunization, an important area in the health of a child was encouraged but not insisted upon. Studies have shown that a majority of death among children are attributable to measles, tetanus, tuberculosis, pertussis and polio which are all preventable through immunization. Malaria, which had made a greater part of Nigeria the 'white man's grave', turned it into a cemetery for the Nigerian child. Many reasons can account for the lackadaisical attitude. The country was in transition from British occupation to nation hood. Nationalists were battle weary from the struggle for independence. Furthermore most of them were engaged in sorting out the

spoils from the independence struggle. There was the cultural disposition, largely based on ignorance, which made parents suspect the intent and potency of foreign medication. It was in this atmosphere of vacillation that the Nigerian child became consumed in the thirty month civil war whose immediate crisis leading to it began in 1966.

Going by the United Nations definition of a child which is eighteen years, the Nigerian child was both a victim and a participant in the civil war that raged from 1967 to 1970. As a victim, the child died in war; others, especially the females were raped, while others were exposed to countless iniquities and suffered many deprivations. On both sides of divide, the Nigerian child was part of what was called collateral damage. The fact that the child's parent had their attention consumed by war was a major assault on the development of a significant number of children. Mention has been made that problems in early childhood, especially behavioural, often lead to health and psychological problems in early childhood, especially behavioural, often lead to health and psychological problems which may be difficult to overcome in adulthood. Indeed, a study has found that "the three-month olds with may be difficult to overcome in adulthood. Indeed, a study has found that "the three-month olds with less engaged fathers were more likely to be in the 10 per cent of children who displayed the beginnings of behavioural problems at one year old" (Cohen, 2012). Fathers on both sides of the civil war could not and did not, because of the demands of the war, engage with their children.

Furthermore, on the side of Biafra, and since starvation was a tactics of the war, there is no mystery about the children born between 1963 and 1970. Most died. There is controversy, notwithstanding the war propaganda, as to the number of children who may have been starved to death to be somewhere between one and two million (Jacobs, 1968). Regardless, however, the pictures of children coming out of war were those of severely malnourished children with various ailments and diseases such as marasmus, edema and *kwashiorkor*. Pictures of grotesquely bloated children made the posters showing the depths of human depravity and the consequences of war. But the child was not just a victim of a crisis which was socio-political and economic in nature, they were participants in the mayhem.

With the proliferation of wars since the 1950's, and as the Cold War between the superpowers intensified, children have increasingly been a part and parcel of conflicts. Their values range from the surreal to the mundane. They tend to be obedient, easier to manipulate and do not question orders, some special tenet of the adult soldier. They can also serve as they did in the civil war as cannon-fodders. On the Biafran side, and by 1968, children were routinely conscripted as soldiers to fight in (Osakwe, 2011). In course of the war, there was also an organization called Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters (BOFF), which was essentially a collection of under-aged children and were used in all manner to prosecute the war.

Not minding the carnage and violence the Nigerian Civil War meted on the child and by the child, another important feature was the separation of children from their parents. The civil war, in this regard, brought about refugees, as in the case of children who were extracted from the country and sent to the many relief area staging posts such as Gabon and Ivory Coast by the many relief agencies operating in the Eastern region of Nigeria. There were also displaced children, those with or without parents who were brandied around in various relief centres within the country. Some were permanently dislocated and orphaned out, while some re-united with their parents (Osakwe, 2011). But the agony, the trauma and the psychological effects would have persisted.

During this time in the history of the Nigerian child, a significant and extant feature, were the iniquities exhibited on the girl child. For a country, where some cultural practices expound gender-based inequity, the civil war accentuated such habits. Routinely, the girl child who was exposed to forced marriages from ages ten to fifteen, were exposed to rape and sexual slavery; hunger and exploitation at refugees and internally displaced persons centres during food distribution; malnutrition because the special needs of the child were not being considered; poor health services with obvious long term effects on reproductive and mental health. In all of this not least was education. Education during the war was not only a risk to embark upon as it was a luxury and un-affordable (Osakwe, 2011). The war was telling on the Nigerian child, but perhaps the most telling was the post war era.

THE SECURITY OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD IN 1970'S AND BEYOND

In the immediate post war months, the Nigerian child experienced the vicissitudes of war. The government, espousing the ideals of reconciliation, and rehabilitation did not show these with respect to the Nigerian child. They inherited an environment that was laced with mines, un-disposed munitions, ammunitions and ordnance of war. Children, naturally curious, pick up objects that appear to them as toys and they either paid the ultimately sacrifice or they are maimed and “differently-abled” as a result of detonation of the explosives. Indeed, because the life span of some of these explosives can be up to fifty years, its effects still linger.

Something worth noting in this discourse, and has been mentioned earlier, is the portrayal of the child as a hapless victim. Willing or unwillingly, they participated in the Civil War and any attempt to undervalue their role would amount to intellectual dishonesty. While war is bad, children as defined for the purposes of this paper are an enormous resource for the various Nigerian communities and can be sourced in unleashing mayhem as was the case in the civil war. The wisdom is to get it right from birth through childhood that would make the child a more positive resource rather than a negative one. They could be veritable partners in their own development as well as that of the nation.

Nonetheless, a case must still be made on child abuse in the post-Civil War years. Child abuse has been variously defined by scholars but the child Abuse Council has described and defined it as:

... physical shaking, hitting, beating, burning, or biting a child. It is emotional-constantly blaming or putting down a child excessive yelling, shaming. It is sexual-incest, any forced sexual activity, exposure to sexual stimulation not appropriate for the child's age. It is neglect- a pattern of failure to provide for the child's physical needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care; a pattern of failure to provide for the child's physical needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care; a pattern of failure to provide for the child's emotional needs, such as affection, attention, and supervision (Funsho, 2012:21).

If anything, and with the above definition, the Nigerian child, domestically and nationally, was serially abused in the 1970's and beyond.

The post Nigerian Civil War era not only had reconciliation, renovation and rehabilitation, it also saw to an oil boom that was so enormous that as legends would have it, military leadership of the country did not know what to do with the funds. Before long, corruption and mismanagement decimated the funds. However, the era from about 1973, saw to the physical construction

of structures, some of them “white elephant” projects and an incipient urbanization. In this urbanization process, slums and its consequent grotesque growth of all forms of social pathologies, dotted the landscape. Obviously, it had a deleterious effect on the child, especially the most vulnerable, the girl child. While the health and security of the child is highlighted in the urban areas, the ones in the village suffer other untold hardships such as early marriage (Population Council, 2010).

The distractions from the Nigerian child by the then military governments and citizens alike was not limited to the consequences of oil boom, urbanization or the perpetuation of rural poverty. There was an institutional disinterest on the affairs of the child. In the judicial realm, for instance, and for the Nigerian child with legal responsibility, the system was not child compliant. Children often shared adult prisons due to lack of juvenile prisons or reform institutions. The same court system for greater part of this quarter of a century was used in trying both adults and children. The bench presented magistrates and judges who adjudicated adult and children matters. The justice system also lacked trained personnel in matters affecting children.

CONSEQUENCE OF THE SECURITY OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Nigerian child has the right to feel secured. A secured environment is needed by the Nigerian child to study, play and develop our talents without fear of kidnapping, terrorism, tribal clashes, religious wars, or other forms of violence and unrest that have plagued Nigerian since 1960. Violence against children extends to child labour and child trafficking.

Children represent approximately one-third of the world’s population and have the right to survive, live and grow up in a decent environment, with all that implies: attending school, enjoying good health and nutrition, and living and growing in safety and security. The Nigerian child is central to sustainable development in many ways as gleaned from the essay. The Nigerian child has often been examined as a social issue neglecting its deep security implications. A widely accepted definition of sustainable development comes from “Our Common Future”, the 1987 landmark report of the Brundtland Commission which states that “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). Sustainable development is about both inter-generational and intra-generational equity.

Sustainable development involves progress both within and across four integrally connected dimensions: inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability and the rule of law. These dimensions are linked to social security, economic security, environmental security (Weiss, 1992). Dominant perceptions associate sustainable development mainly with the natural environment, neglecting the security dimension. The paper introduces the security of the Nigerian child into the matrix of sustainable development arguing that state policies must be molded in such a way that the environment is preserved for the security of the child who represents the next generation. Thus the environmental coloration of sustainable development is engaged towards balancing the scales of equity on all fronts to break cycles of poverty and ensure that the children of today and tomorrow are able to have and inherit a liveable, safe world. However, in Nigeria, social deprivations and security shocks in childhood very often persist into adulthood, from where they are passed on to future generations.

CONCLUSION

The security of the Nigerian child since 1960, when all is said, is a fractured one. It is laced with ignorance and garnished with institutional and adult disinterest. However, the Nigerian child's population as well as its resource is and have always been very significant for sustainable development. Consequently, it deserves appraisal and re-appraisal for knowledge, for understanding and for guidance. For the first quarter of a century from the 1960's the Nigerian child was a form and function, a part and parcel of its security. There was a rather complex interplay between the child and the adult resulting in a stunted development and poor dynamism. The greater part of this period which was under military rule in all likelihood contributed to the nature and character of the Nigerian child's historical experience. But it may also have served as a catalyst since the agitation for democratic rule and subsequent experiments in democratic practice, plus the euphoria leading to the epoch Child's Rights Convention of 1989, unleashed impulses that may have turned a corner in the security dimension of the Nigerian child as it affects sustainable development. .

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