Nigeria’s Rotten Education System

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Criminal neglect, poor funding, corruption, policy somersault, unqualified teachers and lack of motivation among other factors conspire to wreak havoc on Nigeria’s education system

At first, there is nothing to suggest that the place is anything other than a street market. As the vehicle heads down Ojoto Street, via Onitsha – Owerri Road, the visitor is soon confronted with the sight of street traders lining up the road, and then, suddenly, Okpoko Community Primary School comes into view. A walk around the school surrounding through Amiri Street instantly evokes a feeling of shock and repulsion. It’s a terrible sight that strikes one in the face. Filth, heaps of refuse and stench all over, and pigs (yes pigs) snorting about. Apart from human beings; pigs, filth and heaps of refuse are the next most visible sights in this neighbourhood. Feasting and wallowing in the putrid, stagnant water and refuse heaps that literally encircle Okpoko Community Primary School, the pigs could not have wished for a better environment. except that the place is supposed to be a school environment. Inside the Okpoko Community Primary School, a block of classrooms, including the head teachers’ office, had been abandoned owing to the danger posed by the refuse heap that had spread into the compound. On September 12, when Newswatch visited the school, the state of decay in this supposed centre of learning was overwhelming. Although the pupils and teachers of the school were on recess, the terrible state of the environment had nothing to do with that. Newswatch’s investigations showed that the area has long been noted as a dump site. The magazine’s search for answers on the anomaly, led it to some top officials of the school. They only agreed to speak on condition of anonymity. According to a female staff, the school authorities had written series of letters to both the Anambra State government and its agencies to come to their aid, but nothing significant came out of it. Rather than first evacuate the heap of refuse that had piled up for many years, the state government, in its wisdom, chose to construct a block of classroom opposite the refuse dump. But even the classrooms whose construction, according to the source, was completed in December 2010, “has no chairs or desks, and the floor has started crashing due to poor work done by the contractor.” Newswatch learnt that the primary school is made up of four sections, one of which is Okpoko Community Primary School 2, a part of which had since been abandoned, owing to the threatening refuse heap. Apart from students who have been displaced, the head teacher of the school had also been forced to abandon her office. But generally, Okpoko Community Primary School is an eyesore and a poor advertisement of what a public school should look like. A primary 6 pupil of the school, name withheld, told Newswatch about her experiences in the school. “When we are in class, the smell of faeces and refuse disturbs us. People come to defecate in our school. I’m begging government to come and help us.” A senior member of staff of the school said the school’s filthy environment did not happen overnight. “The refuse dump has been there for more than 20 years. That is the situation I met, and you can see for yourself how beautiful it is.” This sarcastic view, does little to distract from the issue, as it is difficult to behold Okpoko Community Primary School and not be moved to ask questions about its condition. One of those who is not happy with the condition of the environment is Kalu Awo, chairman of the Parents Teachers’ Association of Okpoko Community Primary School 2. He told Newswatch in Onitsha that he had tried severally, in league with other concerned parents and the school authorities, to find a solution to the menace without success. “ We have written series of letters to the governor, Peter Obi, but nothing has come out of them, except for the block of classroom that was built. Nothing was done about the refuse dump. I also know that the school authorities have been writing to the agencies in charge of schools in the state but nothing has been done.” It is not only pupils of Okpoko Community Primary School that are subjected to studying under the suffocating stench in the area. Close to it are the Kings Children School and Assemblies of God School, both private schools. This frightening picture of Okpoko Community Primary School is just a sample of what some public schools in Onitsha look like. Downtown the area is the Community Boys Secondary School, Okpoko. The secondary school is made up of two sections. The first, which accommodates the JS 1 to SS 1 students, overlooks a bush. There are weeds all over the fence and inside the surroundings, and just by the side of the fence is a sprouting garbage site. There are no doors and windows in the classrooms except the staff room and the administrative office housing the principal’s office. There are also no desks or chairs in the school, and the toilet facility there is in very bad shape. A staff of the school who requested not to be named, told Newswatch that it is “unfair for the students to be subjected to using that toilet, as it is not in good condition.” The other section of the school, which is occupied by SS 2 to SS3 students is worse in appearance, even though it has everything in common with the former. The area is overgrown by weeds and the only room in the building that has a door and window is the vice-principal’s office. The classrooms have no chairs or desks, and, apart from that, empty bags of cement were used to cover certain openings in the building. On the day Newswatch visited the school, some masons were seen offloading some blocks from a tipper, for the construction of a classroom. A source told the magazine that the construction was being financed by a politician from the area who was approached by the school management to assist with the building. The same source revealed that, apart from the borehole that was provided by the state government, most of the maintenance of the classrooms in the school was carried out through private donations from parents and concerned individuals. He added that each student of the school provides his own locker and, as such, takes it home during holidays. Reacting to the poor condition of the school, a source told Newswatch that “we have written severally to the state government but there was no response from them.” A student of the school, on his part, appealed for support, to enable him have pleasant memories of the school in years to come. “I want to see new doors and windows provided and the road leading to it repaired.” That is also the prayer of students of Kabawa Primary School, Lokoja. Apart from the dilapidated infrastructure in the school, the pupils have had to endure endless

torture that comes in the form of stench from a refuse dump nearby. The dump was a source of embarrassment for Ibrahim Musa, a primary four pupil of the school, on the day his school reopened for the new session on September 12. Having arrived the school that day, Musa saw some of his friends chatting in front of the classroom, and happily went to join them. But his joy soon evaporated after one of his friends told him blatantly: “you are smelling.” It wasn’t a joke. Upon assessment, it was discovered that Musa had stepped on human waste on his way to school. Embarrassed and saddened by this discovery, the poor boy rushed to clean up the mess. But where he stepped on the excreta was not lost on the students: the refuse dump. It is under such squalid environment that pupils of Kabawa primary school, which is located in the northern part of the state capital, study. They are daily subjected to the oozing stench from the environment. Abubakar Adamu, a resident of the area, told Newswatch that all efforts by the school authority to stop the community from using the place as a dump site didn’t work. But the filthy environment is not the only worry of pupils of Kabawa primary school. They also live in fear that their classroom could collapse any time as the structure is dilapidated. The problem of poor or dilapidated infrastructure cuts across the states. Newswatch investigations in Enugu State show that, apart from a new block of classroom that is under construction in Community Central Primary School, Ogonogoeji Akpugo, in Nkanu West local government area, some of the classrooms, have no doors and windows. The borehole in the school had long broken down and weeds have overgrown the backyard. Some of the desks are also in bad shape and the toilet facility is nothing to write home about. One of the two toilets in the school has no roof. Yet, students, pressed to relieve themselves, are either forced to use them, or look for an alternative elsewhere. It is the same situation in nearby Akpugo High School and in Community Secondary School, Amagunze, in Nkanu East LGA. Many of the classrooms have no windows and doors, and most of the roofings have either caved in or are leaky, including the laboratory room. In Akpugo High School, old zincs were used to cover some classroom windows. But that does nothing for the image of the school, as the entire buildings in the school are in dire need of renovation. Mirabel Udoafor, a student of Girls High School, Inyi, in Orji River, told Newswatch about the challenges she faces in her school. “The first problem is the truancy of teachers. Some teachers don’t come to school in a month. Sometimes they give students notes to copy and thereafter, they don’t bother to teach anything on what they have given us. Yet, they would go ahead and set tests. The second problem is that, in my school, some of the buildings have leaky roofs. Although some of them were worked on, they have no doors. Also, our library has a leaking roof and we were told to contribute N500 each to enable them repair it. And the hall where students sit for WAEC exams also leaks water.” Challenges range from school to school and these, many analysts insist, have a psychological effect on students, leading to poor performance. In Girls High School, Ezillo, in Ishielu LGA of Ebonyi State, whenever they need to answer nature’s call, students prefer to head to the bush to do it because the toilet in the school is not conducive for use. Newswatch learnt that efforts were made to provide the school a befitting toilet facility a few years ago but, according to a source, the contractor handling the project suddenly abandoned the work. That, however, was not the only project that was abandoned by the contractor midway. There is also the fence project which was being worked on but was left uncompleted as well as a block of classrooms and administrative offices. “Fencing the school would enable us have better control of the students because there are many openings through which the girls could easily slip away without permission,” said a source in the school. She added that, apart from the uncompleted fence, the school faces accommodation problems due to the failure to complete the classroom and administrative buildings.The school’s kitchen also needs to be refurbished, to cater for the needs of boarders. The nearby Ezillo Primary School is in a terrible state of disrepair. There are no doors or windows or fans and the floors and buildings require nothing short of total reconstruction. The same situation obtains in Izzi High School and Ndiebo Ishieke Community Primary School, both in Abakaliki. The story is that of damaged ceilings, cracked pavements and floors, leaking roofs, with excreta littering some of the classes. In Kaduna State, while the state of infrastructure in a few schools are of average standard, majority are in a decrepit condition. In some classrooms, there are no roofs while many others have no furniture. In most of the schools visited by Newswatch, classrooms were overgrown by weeds; the laboratories had little or no equipment while libraries were stocked with old books. In Ekiti State, Newswatch investigations showed that many classrooms, especially those in urban centres are overcrowded. Ekiti State, one of the states in Western Nigeria, prides itself as the “fountain of knowledge.” People of that part of the country of what later became Nigeria were probably the first to embrace formal education which was introduced by the early Christian missionaries. When, in 1955, free primary education was introduced in the present South-West; the area recorded high enrolment rate in school. But the decay in the system, is being cited by some people in the state, as the reason indigenes have recorded poor results in the West African Examination Council, WAEC and other public examinations in recent times. This has been a source of worry to many indigenes of the state. As a result, all principals of public schools in the state were recently mandated to sit for an examination to determine their proficiency. The test is already causing ripples in the state as there are fears that some principals may lose their jobs. About 500 principals participated in the examination. But Kayode Fayemi, the governor of the state, has dismisssed fears that the examination was meant to witch hunt some people. But he was emphatic that civil servants and teachers would no longer enjoy automatic promotion in the state. The measure, he said, became necessary in order to tackle the rot that had eaten deep into public schools and halt the embarrassing failure in public examinations by pupils and students of government owned schools. The problem is not restricted to Ekiti alone. All over the country, the picture is the same. Although some state governments across Nigeria like Edo, Akwa Ibom, Lagos and Rivers are known to have rehabilitated or built new schools, a lot still needs to be done. In fact, the number of schools in dire need of total rehabilitation pale into insignificance when compared to the good ones available. That means that most Nigerian students, whether in the northern, eastern, western or southern part of the country, study under conditions that are far below acceptable standard anywhere in the world. Such squalid conditions under which they study is believed to have a direct impact on their overall performance in later life, if the view that man is a product of his environment is anything to go by. But some

people believe that the problem associated with Nigeria’s educational system is not only about poor or dilapidated infrastructure. Although poor infrastructure is proof of the poor funding of education, there’s also the problem of unqualified teachers as well as failure of policies and corruption. A head teacher in Kaduna State told Newswatch that some people who today parade themselves as teachers are simply not good enough. “In those days when we were employed, we went through screening to determine whether we were competent for the job. But now, employment is for sale.” She submitted that in her school, “there are teachers who cannot write lesson notes” and yet are National Certificate of Education, NCE, holders. If she had her way, such incompetent hands would be flushed out of the system. That is one of the major problems facing the education sector today: dearth of quality teachers. According to Anthonia Baduku, a sociology lecturer at the Kaduna State University, “if you want to really assess the educational system, you should first of all study the teachers themselves. Do they really have what it takes to teach?” Cordelia Ogbumuo, an educationist, in her assessment of Nigeria’s educational system, attributed the declining standard of education to poor training of teachers. The problem, she said, was mainly caused by the abolition of teachers training colleges and its replacement with the grossly deficient National Teacher Institute’s Programme. Ogbumuo believes that TTC exposed a teacher to basic teaching skills like organising notes of lessons, lesson plans and lesson objectives, which cover three domains namely: cognitive, affective and psychomotive. She also noted that most students on teaching practice are not well supervised by their teachers. “TTC equips teachers to manage students. It is also the foundation of sound education and if this foundation is destroyed, the educational system will be destroyed,”she said. Samuel Demide, principal of ASCL staff Comprehensive Secondary School, Ajaokuta also believes that quality teachers are in short supply: “If you go to some schools, you will find products of secondary schools who could not pass their Senior School Certificate Examination teaching students,” he said, adding that the educational system today is extremely poor. “What we have these days are inadequate staff, poor infrastructure and improper monitoring of the performance of teachers. When you have a secondary school product who failed his SSCE, teaching in a secondary school, you cannot expect something good from that school.” But Gregory Ugwu, an Enugu-based teacher, believes that the poor welfare package for teachers, is at the root of the problem confronting the education sector. “Government, to my mind, is solely responsible for the mess in the education sector because it has failed to address the welfare of teachers. So, we have a case where teachers no longer take teaching seriously. They now have part time jobs. Even though, fully employed by government, they consider teaching as a part time job. If we go down to the basics, you may discover some schools where a teacher might not appear in class up to five times in a month. How do you expect the students to do well in such a situation?” As far as Ugwu is concerned, the lamentable state of education today, is the result of the negligence the sector has suffered over the decades. “There is a latin maxim which translates thus: you don’t give what you don’t have. It’s what is given to the students that they bring forth.” Poor rumeneration was also cited by some teachers in Kaduna as a major debilitating factor confronting the education sector. One headmaster showed Newswatch a pay voucher showing that a level six teacher earns less than N15,000 per month. Another example of poor incentive showed Newswatch is the promotion letter of a staff in his school who was promoted since 2007 but is yet to start enjoying the benefits associated with the promotion. He wondered how such a staff could give his best in such circumstance. One teacher, who simply gave his name as Yakubu, summed up the problem in his school, located at Ungwan Television, Kaduna State, this way. “We have one laboratory only for all the science subjects and there are no tools there. Our salary is so poor. My salary for instance as a level eight teacher is N30, 188. How can I cope with that?” he asked. He explained that “the school administrators also add to the problem,” because “we realise substantial money from school fees at the beginning of every term. But this money ends up in their pockets instead of using such to repair some of the collapsed infrastructure in the school.” Uche Azikiwe, a professor of educational foundation at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and widow of the late Nnamdi Azikiwe, while also urging that the welfare of teachers be improved, wants the supervisory or inspectorate divisions in the education sector to be strengthened to ensure that “ teachers do what they are supposed to do, so that anyone found wanting should be sanctioned.” She also thinks that the secondary school curriculum is rather “unwieldy” as students study up to 14 or 15 subjects, only to later concentrate on 7 or 8 subjects in the senior secondary level. She feels it would help if students are made to focus early on their areas of interest, as different people have different inclinations or skills. Azikiwe said that the Nigerian educational system would not have gotten this bad if respective state governments, from the local, state, and federal levels had played their roles well. “The classroom I attended in Enugu five decades ago is still the way it was, with just one or two blocks added,” she said. Pat Oyeniyi, lecturer, University of Ado-Ekiti, advises the government to immediately fund education as that is the major cause of the crisis in the sector. He regrets that there never was a time Nigeria came close to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO’s recommendation of setting aside about 26 percent of the annual budget for the development of education. “Our leaders are paying lip service to the development of education otherwise, there is no reason why the security vote and general administration continue to take more of the annual budget to the detriment of education.” In a study titled: A Reflection of the Orphan Status of Secondary Schools in Nigeria, written by Silvester Onoja, the performance of Nigerian students in the last five years in WAEC and National Examination Council, NECO results were highlighted. The latest was the May/June 2011 WAEC result “which shows the very poor state of our secondary education.” The paper quotes Iyi Uweadia, the head of WAEC national office, as saying that “only 30.9 percent of the one million, five hundred and forty thousand, two hundred and fifty (1,540,250) candidates made five credits and above including English and Mathematics.” The implication of this, the paper asserts, is that “69.1 percent of these candidates cannot gain entry into the tertiary institutions because they are not qualified.” This, it added. “is the true reflection of the albatross that stares us in the face because of obvious lapses in the system.” Onoja’s study, provided statistics on the

performance of students in the last six years, and also compared the results of public and private schools. It shows that, in year 2006, only 11.08 percent of students of public schools in Nigeria earned five credits as against 41.49 percent recorded by students of private schools. In 2007, the number of public students who scored above five credits dropped to 10.2 percent as against the 36.50 percent recorded by students of private schools. The strong performance of students of private schools continued in 2008, 2009 and 2010, as they recorded 44.90 percent, 47.25 percent and 42.60 percent in that order, compared to that of public students who had 13.72, 14.48 and 11.48 percent. Onoja, who is also the Kogi State commissioner for education, said the term “orphan status of secondary schools in Nigeria,” as title of his study, reflects the level of neglect secondary education has undergone. “Secondary schools have no parents, they have been left to the whims and caprices of individuals and states. Why is secondary school an orphan? Other levels of education have regulatory bodies except secondary education. You have the UBE as a regulatory body for primary education. The NUC is a regulatory body for the Universities, NBTE is a regulatory body for Polytechnics and Monotechnics, NCCE is a regulatory body for colleges of education. Even nomadic education has a regulatory body, it is only secondary education that has no regulatory body.” The performance of private students compared to their public counterparts might not come as a surprise to some observers. Jimi Kayode, a lecturer in the department of Journalism, Lagos State University, LASU, noted that, compared to public schools, private schools are better managed. “They have better equipment. Although there have been talks that some of them don’t have qualified teachers and talks like that, even though I don’t really believe that, my observation is that they are well managed. And they keep the population of the classroom to a manageable level.” Kayode added that, because the public schools have been “run down,” many people now prefer private schools. This poor view of public schools is shared by many people, including government officials. In 2006, Oby Ezekwesili, the then education minister embarked on a nationwide tour of schools in a bid to have first hand knowledge of public primary and secondary schools. The programme, known as “Operation-Reach-All Schools,” confirmed that there were “palpable signs of acute shortage of classroom blocks and most of those that were available had either leaking or blown off roof.” The team also found that , in many public schools, most of the teachers on the staff lists were not qualified to teach. Apart from this, the tour also revealed that there was a shortage of teachers in the public schools. It was revealed that, of “872,468 teachers needed for the success of the expanded scope of the UBE scheme nationwide, only 575.068 were available. But if that policy guided any government policy between then and now, the signs or improvement were not obvious. Last October, President Goodluck Jonathan, as proof of his disaffection with the state of Nigeria’s educational system, convened a two-day summit on education known as “Presidential Stakeholders Summit on Reclamation, Restoration and Sustenance of Quality and Ethics on education.” The group consisted of “egg heads, educationists and stakeholders who were called upon to find an enduring solution to the crisis in the education sector and the resultant decline in the standard of teaching and learning in public schools across the country.” And alarmed by the mass failure in WAEC exams this year, the House of Representatives members debated the issue and said they would invite Ruqayyah Ahmed Rufai, the education minister, to appear before the house to explain what went wrong. But another disturbing fact is the issue of exam malpractice linked to students, whether of private or public schools. According to a resident of Oturkpo, Benue State, is gradually acquiring notoriety as a haven of “miracle centres.” It’s a metaphor for educational centres where students, no matter their ability, are believed to record fantastic results in their exams. Such students are said to pay money to proprietors of schools who in turn, aid them, through hook or crook, to record extraordinary results. Although most public schools located in urban areas boast reasonable amount of students at the SS 1 to 2 level, many of them leave in droves once SSCE or NECO exams draws near. They do not quit to stay at home but to register in some other schools, usually in the rural areas where they expect to pass their exams with ease. Oche Igoche, a secondary school teacher, told Newswatch that the urban-rural movement is the latest malady besetting Nigeria’s educational sector as students now choose to go to places where exam malpractices are encouraged. Igoche said the trend may also have been sparked off by the fact that students do not get the best of education these days and thus many of them lack the confidence that they can sit and pass their exams unaided. But Benue State is not alone in this. Some years ago, it was reported that some students from the Eastern part of Nigeria died in a car accident on their way to Edo State to sit for their WAEC exams. Not a few questions were raised by that revelation, as many wondered why the students chose to travel that far to write the exams when they easily could have done so in their place of domicile. Ngozi Osarenren, former commissioner of education in Edo State, told Newswatch that one of the challenges she faced upon assumption of office was how to eradicate the miracle centres that abound in the state. She described the centres as places “where you may not enter an examination hall and at the end of it, you would have eight credits.” The cankerworm is widespread and is a source of worry to many teachers and concerned Nigerians. One teacher believes that the trend is more common with private schools. “Government should try and stop the malpractice. We train students from JS 1 to SS 2, but end up registering only about 60 for WAEC. The rest will go to where they call special centres, where they are aided to score high grades. We are not happy about it and government should stop it.” Often, the miracle centres hide under the guise of providing lessons to prospective students but end up promising them wonderful grades for a fee. Ugwu argues that there’s nothing wrong in operating such lesson or remedial centres, so long as they do what is right. “The whole time I have been in teaching, I derive about 80 of my teaching experience from lesson centres. Of course, I still operate one. But the unfortunate thing is that the primary motive or reason for operating these lesson centres has been thrown overboard. Now, people develop the idea of special centres and it is everywhere in Nigeria and some parents don’t care to ask what is so special about these centres.” There’s also the problem of corruption and “policy somersault,” among government officials. “Even as we complain of underfunding, are the little monies budgeted for the education sector properly utilised? The question is no, and corruption is at the heart of it all,” said Emenike Nnadi, a public affairs analyst. On the other hand, it had been a favourite

past time of successive Nigerian administrations and their officials to introduce policies which they pay lip service to. For instance, there was the Universal Primary Education,UPE, which was introduced by General Yakubu Gowon. Although the military administration of Olusegun Obasanjo modified the UPE concept in 1976, the Shehu Shagari led-National Party of Nigeria did not fancy the idea and therefore, abolished it. The Ibrahim Babangida regime later came up with its own, 6-3-3-4 system of education. When Obasanjo returned in 1999 as a civilian leader, he introduced the Universal Basic Education, UBE, a policy which a critic argues “laid more emphasis on continuing education instead of making sure that students come out fully prepared to take on challenges in the society.” In an article: Chasing the Shadows, Mike Akpan, a seasoned journalist, noted that “the country’s educational system has remained very unstable since 1960,” and that in the last 50 years, “Nigeria had jumped from one educational system to the other depending on the brain waves of those in power at a particular time.” Curiously, the numerous policies have not succeded in attracting more Nigerians to school. A recent report by United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF, in conjuction with UNESCO, and the federal ministry of education, showed that Nigeria has a high percentage of students who are “out of school.” At a stakeholders meeting on the presentation of the draft report on the “Out of School Children Study,” it was revealed that “estimated primary age and junior secondary age population of Nigeria stood at 24.7 million and 10.9 million respectively,” and that “7.3 million (representing 29.6 percent) children of primary school going age were out of school.” Although the challenge confronting the educational system is huge, some analysts believe it is not insurmountable. “The way out is funding, funding and more funding,” said Nnadi. Ndubuisi Chibueze Agbo, Ebonyi State Commisssioner of education, said although it is the responsibility of government to ensure qualitative and quantitative education for the citizens, it should not be left to it alone. He would want private stakeholders to also contribute their quota. He, however, added that governor Martin Elechi, had, as part of his effort to improve the quality of education in the state, recently released 700 million Naira as the state’s UBEC, Universal Basic Education Commission, fund and that the money will, when added to that of UBEC, go a long way in consolidating the onongoing rehabilitation and construction of schools in the state. He added that renovation of schools had been ongoing in Ebonyi State since 2007 that Elechi was elected governor. “The decay in the educational sector was obvious. I think we had only two science schools and the governor said it was unusual. He reintroduced the boarding systems in our schools and built 27 pilot schools where he provided enough facilities for the children like library, hostel facilities, power, water and employed teachers.” As part of the means to ensure that only qualified teachers are retained, Agbo said that teachers in the state were recently made to sit for an examination and that anyone who failed to measure up, will be shown the way out of the system. Kay Onyechi, Anambra State commissioner for education, also told Newswatch that “when the Obi administration came on board, the educational sector was in a collapsed state,” and that, “so far, the state government has constructed and provided buses and computers to over 100 secondary schools as well as constructed classroom blocks in over 177 primary schools.” Alice Lawrence-Nemi, Rivers State commissioner for education, said the government is not unmindful of the high population of students in the state and the possible challenges that could pose. But she promised that the Chibuike Amaechi administration would build more schools across the state. For now, the onus is on the federal and state governments to square up to the challenges of investing properly in the education sector in order to reverse the rot and restore the nation’s educational system to what it should be. Reported by Dike Onwuamaeze, Obong Akpaekong, Godfrey Azubike, Annete Oghenerhaboke, Pita Ochai, Ishaya Ibrahim and Augustine Adah