

# VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL EDUCATION, THE STATE AND CITIZENRY IN NIGERIA<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to the School of Vocational Education of the Federal College of Education (Technical) Akoka for inviting me to share my thoughts on vocational technical education in our country. I feel highly privileged on account of the invitation and do hope that I would succeed in falling back on my residual knowledge as an educationist in order not to betray the confidence of the school, although personal circumstances occasioned by state harassment compelled me to seek accommodation in another profession.

The way the topic is couched suggests that we are to limit our discussion of vocational education to its technical segment. In other words our focus shall be only on technical vocational education. But then we need to understand the meaning of general vocational education. A definition that I prefer for its simplicity and comprehensiveness defines vocational education as ‘any form of education whose primary purpose is to prepare persons for employment in recognised occupations’ (Okoro, 1993:1)<sup>3</sup>. It is obvious therefore that vocational education is a term that is more all-embracing than technical education which O.M. Okoro defines as ‘a post-secondary vocational training programme whose major purpose is the production of technicians’<sup>4</sup>. The National Policy on Education defines technical and vocational education ‘as a comprehensive term referring to those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life’. Technical education can therefore be seen as the formal training of persons to become technicians in different occupations. Thus any education that is geared towards teaching technical skills and attitudes suitable to such skills can be regarded as technical education.

My main points of departure are that in a world that is technology-driven, a country that fails to take the ‘production of technicians’ seriously such as Nigeria has sentenced itself to perpetual underdevelopment and also that the character and nature of any particular state determines its

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<sup>3</sup> Principles and Methods in Vocational & Technical Education, University Trust Publishers, Enugu, 1993

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.2

attitude and policies to technical education<sup>5</sup> and development. As may already be obvious, I have taken the position that the Nigerian State does not, apart from mere policy sloganeering<sup>6</sup>, accord technical education the pride of place it deserves. Our focus here, consequently, is to explain the apathy of the Nigerian State to technical education and highlight the role that the citizens have to play in order to change the present orientation. It follows, and this is a warning, that this discussion will draw insights from other disciplines such as political science, sociology and law.

### **The Nigerian State and Technical Education**

Writers on technical education have consistently harped on the neglect of technical education by the Nigerian State (see Ozoro, 1982). But surprisingly, the state itself which has the responsibility for developing and funding technical education has also blamed the public (the citizens) for the appalling state of technical education. Usually the general public is blamed for looking down on technicians and for having preference for non-technical courses and professionals. The latest response of the state for the unacceptable state of this important aspect of education is to merely recognise the need for repositioning science, technical and vocational education in the scheme of national education' in the National Policy on Education<sup>7</sup>.

But a cursory examination of the technical colleges and the post-secondary technical institutions in terms of funding, availability of teaching equipment and also of even government employment policies which discriminate against graduates of technical institutions, such as the unending but worthless debate as to which certificate is superior as between degrees issue by the General studies universities and the polytechnics/technical institutions, shows clearly that the slogans in the National Policy on Education are no more than mere platitudes. This verdict should not be considered harsh or surprising as it is easy to demonstrate the lack of seriousness of the state to education generally. While UNESCO recommends that at least 26% of national budgets should be spent on education, in 2010 for example, the Federal Government spent only N249.08 Billion on education generally out of a budget of about 4.07 trillion which translates roughly to 6% of the total budget. Rather than take positive and decisive measures to deal with inadequate of educational funding in general and Technical Vocational Education in particular, members of the ruling elite which compose or constitute the state only lament and shed crocodile tears. A typical example in this regard is the former Chairman of the Senate Committee on Education who lamented in Sokoto that if he had his way Nigeria would spend more than 26 per cent recommended by UNESCO on education in 2009<sup>8</sup>. Why and how a lawmaker who participates

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<sup>5</sup> In this discussion when I use the term technical education I also refer to vocational technical education

<sup>6</sup> In many of the National Policies on Education, lip service is often paid to technical education. I am not interested in reviewing the platitudes contained in those policies in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> See paragraph h of the introduction to the National Policy on Education , 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2004, p.54

<sup>8</sup> See Compass Newspaper of 1<sup>st</sup> July, 2009

in approving budgets did not have his way is a matter that may beat the imagination of people from other countries. But for perceptive Nigerians it is clear that the man was simply displaying the trademark doublespeak and dishonesty of the average Nigerian politician. Given the inferior status accorded technical education, an insignificant proportion of the meagre allocation will be spent on it. Indeed, I would like to throw a challenge to scholars in the field of technical education, if it has not already been done, to analyse budgetary allocations by the state and Federal governments to technical education. I have no doubt that the finding will be saddening. One can glean the lack of seriousness on the part of the Nigerian Government in the fact that it is not one of the 12 countries that adhere to the UNESCO Convention on Technical and Vocational Education which came into force since 29<sup>th</sup> August 1991.

One of my main theses is that the development strategy adopted by the state to a large extent determines its attitude to and policy on technical education. Due to the peripheral role which the Nigerian state plays in international capitalism, particularly its being content to supply raw materials to the advanced capitalist countries, it cannot see the need to develop technical skills in the citizens, hence the neglect of technical education. Related to this is the fact that the elite which compose the state are mainly rent-seekers and so we have a rentier economy which encourages foreign investors such as the multi-national oil corporations to exploit our resources with their own technical knowhow while the Nigerian state receives commission. The recently passed local content Act in the oil industry is nothing but a cosmetic legislation that does not address the root of the problem of foreign domination of our economy.<sup>9</sup> We cannot understand the development strategy of the Nigerian state unless we understand the nature of the Nigerian state.

The State has been a subject of broad and wide-ranging academic discourse, and expectedly, there exists a vast literature on it<sup>10</sup>. While, we will not review the abundant literature here, we intend to discuss briefly two theoretical perspectives on the state. The first views the state in institutional terms<sup>11</sup> and focuses on the functions of its organs. Gianfranco Poggi's general definition of the state seems typical of the perspective of the institutionalists. According to him, the state is 'a complex set of institutional arrangements for rule operating through the continuous

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<sup>9</sup> See Bamidele Aturu, Review of the Local Content Law in the Oil and Gas Industry (forthcoming), Journal of Business Law.

<sup>10</sup> V.I. Lenin, *The State and the Revolution*; Frank Youngman, *The Political Economy of Adult Education & Development*, Zed Books, London, 2000, pp 199-217; Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State- A Sociological interpretation*, Hutchinson & Co (Publishers) Ltd, 1978, London.

<sup>11</sup> Dafe Otobo pointed this out in *State and Industrial Relations in Nigeria*, Malthouse Press, Lagos, 1988, p.1

and regulated activities of individuals acting as occupants of offices’<sup>12</sup> There is the other view, shared by scholars of the Marxist tradition, which conceives the state as the instrument of class domination of society by the capitalists or the bourgeoisie. Incidentally, there is a passage in Poggi’s The Development of the Modern State that seems to corroborate this view. In describing the liberal state he made the point that it was ‘constructed to favour and sustain through its acts of rule the class domination of the bourgeoisie over the society as a whole’ and that ‘the equality of all individuals before the law made sense as a constitutional principle because as a matter of course the legal protection of private property directed the order-keeping, law enforcement, and repressive activities of police and courts to favour the interests of the propertied groups’<sup>13</sup>

Viewing the state as simply a set of institutions is rather problematic. The definition does not pose or answer the questions: Which class sets up the institutions and dominate it? What are the interests protected by the institutions?; Can the state be reconstituted? and, If so, how? et cetera. This definition which presents the state as acting on behalf of the whole society, as if the institutions are voluntarily set up by all, and does not indicate the specific interest(s) which it serves, contradicts our knowledge or position that society is made up of different interests and classes. If we proceed from the premise that the Nigerian society is made up of different classes<sup>14</sup>, as I do, then one can easily appreciate that the Nigerian state does not exist and can possibly not exist to protect the interest of all the classes of Nigerians. In other words, the Nigerian state is the instrument of the dominant class, the propertied class, for the protection of the interests of that class and necessary subjugation of the interests of the working class. There are ample writings<sup>15</sup> to justify my conclusion on the existence of class and the relevance of class analysis to the Nigerian polity that I do not feel obliged to furnish further elaboration as that is

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<sup>12</sup> The Development of the Modern State- A Sociological interpretation, Hutchinson & Co (Publishers) Ltd, 1978, London, p.1

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p.119

<sup>14</sup> I adopt the arguments proffered by Claude Ake in Revolutionary Pressures in Africa, Zed Press, London, 1978. He concluded that ‘class refers to relation to the means of production and that class membership is decided in terms of ownership or non- ownership of the means of production-p.59; see also Oladipo Fashina, ‘Labour and Politics- the Challenges of Social Transformation of Nigeria, FES, 2009 for a detailed theoretical and practical discussion of the theory of classes in Nigeria.

<sup>15</sup> Those who are interested in pursuing the matter further can consult Ake, *ibid*.

not my aim in this paper. Although I am not unaware of the debate as to the danger of economic determinism or reductionism if one fails to take into consideration other sources and kind of oppression in the society and the possible contributions to the struggle for social change from the new social movements (like the environmentalists, gender and cultural activists), my view is that the fundamentality of class analysis in any study of bourgeois state is not debunked by the existence of those other sources and in the same vein, the centrality of the labour movement to the process of change is not displaced by the new movements which are undoubtedly relevant to the general struggle. I agree with Youngman that multiple causality 'does not diminish the importance given to the concept of class and the methodology of class analysis. Gender, ethnic and racial inequalities may have sources and consequences independent of the relations of production, but they are not totally autonomous of economic factors. These forms of social inequality are shaped by the capitalist mode of production and by the existing class structure. They have a class character. The analytical task of political economy is to clarify the linkages between the class basis of society and these other forms of social domination'<sup>16</sup>

Our central argument which we must never lose sight of for a moment is that the character of the state determines its attitude to development and technology in general and vocational technical education in particular. As a backward rentier capitalist state, that is, a state that depends on rents or payments from multinational companies that exploit its natural resources with foreign engineers and technicians, and that has accepted the role of providing raw materials for the advanced capitalist states, the Nigerian state does not and cannot place premium on technical education, hence the levity with which it is treated.

But the Nigerian State is not only rentier, but it is neo-colonial. As a matter of fact it is rentier because it is neo-colonial. As a neo-colonial state it is dependent on the dictates of the advanced capitalist countries and institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank created by them. An undeniable consequence of dependence and lack of sovereignty is the impossibility of industrial development. This is the case as 'foreign capitalists dominate such economies, investing mainly in the production of primary commodities from mining to agriculture and partly in low-wage light industry, and they repatriate their profits to the centre. Therefore there is no national dynamic of capital accumulation controlled by the indigenous capitalist class. In fact, the dominant domestic classes (particularly the landowners and commercial capitalist) use their control over the state to facilitate foreign investment and maintain the status quo, which serves their interests'<sup>17</sup>. As Youngman stated while discussing the dependency theory, 'the world

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<sup>16</sup> Op cit., pp. 22-24

<sup>17</sup> Youngman, op cit, p.60

system is structured in a way that makes Third World countries remain dependent on the centres of capitalism. Thus, the possibilities of independent industrialisation in the periphery are blocked by external factors rather than internal ones such as lack of capital and entrepreneurial skills, as argued by modernisation theory, with its focus on development as an endogenous process'<sup>18</sup>.

It is therefore not surprising that the policy of the World Bank on vocational and technical education is the production of technicians who can fit the available jobs and to privatise the process of technical education. In its 1991 policy, the bank made the following prescription:

'The development of a skilled labour force makes an important contribution to development. The challenges are to use employer, private and public training capacities effectively to train workers for jobs that use their skills and to do so efficiently in developing economies increasingly influenced by technological change and open to international competition. Training in the private sector-by private employers and in private training institutions-can be the most effective and efficient way to develop the skills of the work force. In the best cases employers train workers as quickly as possible for existing jobs. Costs are low compared with training before employment, and trained workers are placed automatically in jobs that use their skills'<sup>19</sup>.

Yet, perceptive studies on the global economy have shown that in peripheral countries such as Nigeria which rely on primary commodities and import finished products from the advanced capitalist societies with no industrialisation, to accept the prescription of the world bank to train people only for available jobs is to perpetually make our technicians 'hewers of wood and fetchers of water' and to permanently consign the country to underdevelopment. The perspective of the World Bank on privatisation of technical and vocational education of course derives from its neo-liberal philosophy of 'rolling back the state'. Although that philosophy has been negated or exploded by the so-called global economic meltdown that led to the state in Europe and America taking over banks, the fraudulent prescription is still being forced down the throat of rulers of underdeveloped countries. Ehiedu E.G. Iweriebor (2004:15)<sup>20</sup> argues eloquently an alternative sound perspective to the IMF orthodoxy. His position is that 'the philosophy of liberated development ascribes centrality to the liberated state as the agency for the provision of the political, social and ideological environment for national, technological and scientific equipment...consequently in the light of its central mission, the state has to take the lead in encouraging the over-all development of conditions which would produce the fundamental objectives of liberated development...The State is best suited to commit resources for long-range development without expecting immediate profitability. The indispensability of active state

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<sup>18</sup> Op cit., p.63

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Youngman, op.cit., pp. 70-71

<sup>20</sup> Ehiedu E.G. Iweriebor, Nigerian Technology Development Since Independence [BookBuilders, Ibadan], 2004

involvement in the development of the capital goods<sup>21</sup> sector is confirmed by the contemporary experience of economic development, industrialisation and technological transformation of countries currently touted as successful exemplars of development- the ‘newly industrialising countries (NICs) –Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Brazil and others. In all of these countries, objective studies demonstrate the significance and practical role of government in the development of capital goods industries which then provide the capacity for transformative economic development’

It should be noted that Iweriebor only emphasises the role that a liberated as opposed to a dominated or dependent state such as Nigeria’s is at the present can play in development. If there is any lesson that has been learnt from the banal privatisation of education in Nigeria, it is that the private owners of schools are not interested in technical and technological studies. The private universities and polytechnics offer courses mainly in Business Administration, Accounting and Management showing very clearly what the elite who compose the Nigerian State are interested in is in producing managers to oil the ‘industry’ of primary commodities. Yet this is the nonsense that World Bank prescribes-to produce people with skills for existing jobs, when the point is to create new industrial jobs by changing our policy and attitude to technology. But as has been demonstrated the policy and attitude to technology and technical education cannot change unless we recompose or change the state. And who are the ‘we’? The citizens of course!

#### *The Citizens and Towards a New Political Economy of Technical and Vocational Education*

It is beyond dispute that there is a relationship between the state and citizens. This relationship of ‘two-way allegiance’<sup>22</sup>, as Julian Lonbay put it presupposes obligations and rights for the state and the citizens. Chapter III of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 defines who is a citizen of Nigeria<sup>23</sup>.

The most essential incidence of citizenship is that it comes with rights. One of the most important rights of a Nigerian citizen is that he or she has a right to participate directly or

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<sup>21</sup> He defines capital goods as comprising: manufacture of general machinery, except electrical; manufacture of electrical machinery, apparatus, appliances and supplies; manufacture of transport equipment; and manufacture of professional and scientific, and measuring and controlling equipment; photographic and optical goods

<sup>22</sup> Julian Lonbay, ‘Towards Educational Rights’ in Robert Blackburn (ed), Rights of Citizenship, Mansell Publishing Limited, London, 1993, p.215

<sup>23</sup> See generally sections 25-27 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999

indirectly in the government of this country. This right is guaranteed by Article 13 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act<sup>24</sup>. It provides thus:

'Every citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives in accordance with provisions of the law'

The citizens therefore have a right to organise for the promotion and defence of economic policies that will ultimately guarantee development and secure their welfare and happiness<sup>25</sup>. Having realised that the nature of the State determines development and technological policies, the citizens must be politically involved. As a matter of fact one of the characteristics that distinguish a citizen from a slave is that a citizen has political, social and economic rights. The citizen can organise to change governments through periodic elections; he or she can exercise freedom to criticize policies of the state. But the most important power and right of the citizen from the standpoint of our analysis is to participate in the political struggle to change the state. A political struggle is not an event but series of events and processes that ultimately lead to change.

At present, the elite that constitute the state due to their selfish and parochial interests have made the country an appendage of the advanced capitalist countries. The country lacks political and economic sovereignty. This has led to a situation in which the country is a dumping ground for all sorts of finished products from the advanced capitalist countries. Given this situation, any admonition for the state to take development or technical matters seriously is bound to fall on deaf ears. Indeed when the state as is now constituted issues policies on technical education it is only to hoodwink the people as it lacks the ideological capacity to free the country from the state of underdevelopment. What must the citizens do?

The citizens must fashion a mass movement based on an ideology that can guarantee a self-reliant economy with the working people in control. In other words, the movement shall proceed from the fundamental assumption that only those who produce the wealth of the nation can distribute and manage it effectively and efficiently. The economy will no longer be subordinated to the interests of foreign economies and institutions or be geared towards export of primary commodities. As Iweriebor inimitably put it: 'This means an end to the production and export of agricultural and mineral raw materials; an end to the importation of consumer goods and its sustenance of dependent commerce; the elimination of the nation's self-subjugation to external financial and development agencies and an end to the predominance of commerce over production in the national economic system'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Note that the African Charter is enforceable in Nigeria also by virtue of the Supreme Court decision in *Abacha v Fawehinmi* (Pt.660)

<sup>25</sup> See section 16 of the Constitution, 1999

<sup>26</sup> Iweriebor, *op cit*, p.25

Citizenship requires constant participation and engagement in the political process. An apolitical citizen is a misnomer. The point is not that every citizen must seek a political office, but rather that every citizen must be willing to express himself or herself through all the available channels including but not limited to protests, rallies, participation in trade unions, student, professional, occupational and cultural organisations. This must begin from the very basic units of the country. In schools honest avenues must be created for interaction between staff and students. It is not just creating opportunities to be heard, but rather seeing the process as fundamental to building and sustaining a just and equitable democratic society. The idea is to inculcate horizontal democratic values as opposed to vertical imposition of policies which are inimical to the interests of the working people.

In spite of the broad activity required of the citizens as identified above, they can nevertheless make immediate specific demands even on the existing state, namely:

1. **Increased Funding of Technical Vocational Education:** Governments at all level must be pressured to devote the recommended 26% of their budgets to education. Out of this we should demand that at least about 50% should be allocated to Technical Vocational Education representing roughly 10 % of the total budgets. Rather than spend taxpayers' money establishing General Studies Universities in all the Local Government Areas, and claiming that as an achievement, the existing ones should be well funded so that both staff and students will be motivated to make their contributions to the development of the country.
2. **An End to Policy Somersaults:** one of the greatest problems of our education is that every government wants to give an impression that it is doing something. Thus, policies that are not well thought out are introduced and changed arbitrarily and whimsically. This must change. A few weeks ago we read the confusion among the policy makers as to whether or not they want to abolish Colleges of Education. If government takes education seriously such a recommendation should never have been imagined. It is also worrisome and is a reflection of characteristic policy inconsistency on educational policy that all the Universities of Technology teach law and Business Administration. We must return these institutions to their original state as producers of competent and highly skilled technical manpower. We must build an architecture of technical schools with the Universities of Technology at the apex. Those who choose the technical career path should be able to proceed from the Senior Secondary Schools to Doctorate degrees without feeling inferior in the least to graduates of the general studies institutions.
3. **Enhanced Compensation for Technicians and others**

Technicians and all who pass through our technical-oriented schools ought to be adequately and equitably remunerated. The dichotomy in the civil service between holders of 'General Studies' certificates and technical certificates must not only be

abolished as a matter of policy but in the thinking and attitude of government officials. The truth of the matter is that technicians or technologists are not inferior to their counterparts. It is a matter of career choice and we should make this very clear to our children right from the primary schools.

### *Conclusion*

Nigeria has no chance of developing and meeting the welfare needs of the people without a reconstitution of the state through the struggle of the people. The reconstitution will place the working people on a pedestal by which they can themselves take such decisions as funding of education in general and technical education in particular. Of course, when they are in control they would be able to deal squarely with corruption and waste of public funds by the state as constituted at present. Until and unless the reconstitution takes place politicians who are committed to no idea but looting of the treasury will continue to draw fabulous or jumbo salaries and allowances for doing nothing. The citizens must put an end to all of that nonsense by all means necessary or possible. This is a task that must be seen as urgent and imperative. We would be fooling ourselves if we think that there will be any improvement in funding of education or the policy of the state to technical education without that reconstitution which essentially is the reclaiming of our sovereignty. Thank you for listening and may God bless you.