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## **Time to revive compulsory free education**

My advocacy of universal/compulsory free primary and secondary education for all children throughout the federation is based on three considerations:

1. We have enough money to fund it.
2. It must be compulsory, meaning it would be illegal (a punishable offence) for parents to withhold or prevent their children from going to school, or for children to be found wandering about or working or anywhere except in school during school hours.
3. It must be free, therefore there can be no acceptable excuse (such as lack of money to pay school fees) for keeping any of our children out of school.

The advanced industrial nations long ago discovered that if they are to remain relevant, not to speak of dominant in the world, they must educate their entire populace. Gone are the days of empires built and run on raw military muscle alone; in any case, military combat is today an extraordinarily sophisticated high tech affair: you

have to be well schooled to handle any of those machines. Dominance or even relevance today is a matter of economic muscle—agricultural, industrial and digital muscle—and you can't develop enough of it with a tiny super-rich elite sitting on the heads of masses of sick, malnourished, ignorant neo-slaves.

What does any of this have to do with Nigeria?

Good question!

Just think about it for a minute. More than half our children have never been to school (in some parts of the country it may be up to 95 percent). According to global statistics, Nigeria has 10.5 million children out of primary school alone. To that, add a few more million out of secondary school. What do these millions of children do during school hours?

Only a tiny fraction of those who manage to go through secondary school succeed in finding any sort of productive employment—or manage to go for higher education or for marketable skills training. And thousands of university graduates remain unemployed for years.

The universal complaint is that those who did go to school or university did not learn enough and are ill-fitted for the few jobs that

do exist. With no productive or service industries worth mentioning, where would they get the practical training and work experience that ought to go with classroom and theory? Where are the jobs to be found? The way we are going, Nigeria is heading for relegation to the world's backwaters. A nation without a credible program of mass education has no future.

Nigeria has the money to pay for universal/compulsory free primary and secondary education. That means that education would be treated as a national priority; that trillions would not be shared and consumed every year by a tiny ruling elite; that loans/debts, domestic or foreign, would not be incurred every year, as has been the habit—unless it is to rebuild and service our so badly broken educational system, or to build the infrastructure the entire country so desperately needs, or to provide drinking water and healthcare, or to support industrial agriculture and manufacturing. Certainly, nothing else would justify our falling into debt.

Nigeria has trouble managing its money for the simple reason that those who run Nigeria run it first and foremost for their personal gain. What is there to choose between an Executive that proposes that we consume \$75 of every \$105 we earn from oil, and a

Legislature that insists we consume \$85? They spend months arguing over these ridiculously high figures; but even if they agreed on the lower figure, they would still be way out of line with trends in the well governed nations of the world who know that an economic famine is always around the corner and that, in any case, the smart householder husband his resources, consumes little, saves a lot, and applies the bulk of his earnings to essential developmental projects that raise and maintain a high standard of living for his entire household/nation.

Nigerian leaders are, by contrast, profligate, prodigal, spendthrift, with no sense of a future that ought to be planned for. Leaders of some other oil-producing nations know that oil revenue is headed for a fall not only because oil is now super-abundant all around the globe but also because the largest users are inventing non-oil energy sources. Those leaders are therefore frantically diversifying their economies, mass-educating their citizenry, mass-employing their people in the process of industrializing their agriculture, producing electricity and abundant drinking water, investing in universal and affordable healthcare, constructing roads, railways, and public transport, and manufacturing some of the

everyday goods they need. They are dedicated to lifting their people out of poverty in one generation.

Nigerian leaders talk endlessly about the same things—with eloquent speeches, press releases, their photographs all over the newspapers and television on a daily basis—but there is a huge disconnect between their words and their actions. You begin to wonder: Do our leaders truly believe in Nigeria—or are they just tricksters jostling to grab all they can before the structure falls apart? . . .

**(839 words)**