

## **In defence of dignity and authentic development in Africa**

Obianuju Ekeocha

It is indeed heart-breaking to see the tears of the child in the pangs of hunger. Just as it is soul-wrenching to hear the anguished cry of the child in the pains of disease. To contemplate the day-to-day reality of millions of children ravaged by abject poverty in many parts of Africa should be mind-boggling for us all.

Most people have probably seen the graphic images presented by the western media as the "sights and sounds" of Africa. Let me just say at this point that though some of it is exaggerated by the media, the poverty in Africa is real and cruel especially to the women, children, aged and disabled.

And so the reaction and response that the images elicit in the developed countries is very important in the fight and determination to eradicate poverty. As a born and bred African woman living in Europe, I try my best to observe and gauge these reactions closely.

Some people are moved to volunteer their services to aid and charity organizations working to combat poverty in Africa. Some other people are moved to donate money and materials to these organizations. And there are others who are moved to anger and lamentations, so they complain about the cruelty of the world, yet they do nothing to help. But in more recent times, there has emerged a new group of people who consider the situation in Africa so repugnant that they aim to limit the number of children born in Africa. These are the ones who advocate tirelessly for increased access to abortion and contraceptives from one African country to the next.

From my vantage point of view I believe that to volunteer is heroic, to donate is generous, to lament is pointless but to sterilize the Africans and destroy the lives of their unborn children? That is dehumanizing cruelty and will not help Africa in the long or short run.

The eradication of poverty in Africa has become a core theme, in the last few decades, for most the powerful international organizations. And as a result of this, a lot of healthcare programs have been set up to fight diseases and epidemics in Africa, some food and nutrition initiatives have been launched to fight malnutrition, some agricultural schemes have been introduced to fight famine, but in recent years, an obvious and overwhelming emphasis has been put on providing reproductive health across the continent of Africa in order to fight the increase in population among the people as a solution to the poverty. So this has translated into more advocacy, more resources and disproportionately more effort invested in procuring legalised abortion, contraceptives and of

course 'comprehensive' sex-education for the poorest of the poor of Africa. Billions of dollars have been poured down this drain. And yet the poverty continues to scald and scar the beautiful continent of Africa. The poorest of the poor, still remain poor while the need for aid in Africa remains.

In a way it reminds me of the fate of a person trapped in a deep pit. It is not adequate that he is just given food and water for sustenance, rather the best 'aid' that can be given to him is a life-line so that he can climb out of his predicament.

On this note, all the recent Popes of the Catholic Church (Pope Paul VI, Blessed Pope John Paul II as well as Pope Benedict XVI) have clearly and eloquently appealed for the defence of authentic development and dignity of the developing world through education. In fact in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI pointed out that 'Lack of education is as serious as lack of food' .

So in this epic battle to lift Africa out of the pit of poverty, education becomes a most needed life-line. And for this reason it should become the epicentre of the on-going global discourse on poverty eradication. Indeed, the emphasis should be on the Africans having education rather than they halving their population. And instead of the unsolicited increased access to sterilization, the youth of Africa should be given the highly desired increased access to education.

As for the astronomical amounts of money poured down the drain, they can be channelled into brilliant educational initiatives that will be bound to yield great fruits within the turn of a decade.

Here are some areas of dire need that could be addressed:

### **-Building schools in both rural and urban areas**

Without having accessible school structures, there cannot be education. And there are indeed many communities without schools, and many more with dilapidated structures. And even beyond building up schools, equipping them is also very important because without school books, writing materials, and teaching aids there may be some sort of education, but it will not be good education.

### **-Free or subsidised Teacher training programs**

Without teachers there cannot be education. Without teachers, our classrooms become sitting rooms, our school compounds become mere playgrounds and our text books become coded indecipherable scripts and manuals that mean nothing to the students. The teachers instruct and direct the young minds. They form and inform the next generation. And in the face of such vicious poverty, they will be the ones to equip the youth with all that they need to build up their communities.

### **-Free primary and secondary education for the young**

This is really the *sine qua non* for any society that wants to lay a solid foundation for development. Yet according to UNICEF there are some African countries with Secondary school enrolment rate (SSER) as low as 15%! For the sake of comparison and clarity, in the UK the SSER is 93% and in the USA it is 88%. At this abysmal rate of 15%, it invariably means that almost 90% of the nation's secondary school-aged children would remain uneducated and so would be guaranteed to live below the poverty line in their adulthood. And the vicious cycle of poverty-hunger-disease continues. How can we escape this harsh reality? How can we ever rise into the dignity of earning our own sustenance without depending on others for our food? We really need increased access to free education in all of Africa.

### **-The firm commitment of the powerful international organizations to promote universal education in Africa**

The time has come for a unanimous unified unflinching unrelenting unwavering support and commitment for universal education. The kind of support and commitment that we have seen given to the contraceptive and reproductive health movement. The kind of heavy-handed insistent commitment that was demonstrated at the last Family Planning summit, where leaders of the world's poorest countries were actually required to promise and pledge for increased prevalence rate of contraceptive usage. It is somewhat baffling that in a world where some countries have an education rate as low as 15% among the youth, that the superpowers are not asking any African heads of state to promise and pledge to increase the education rates in their countries as a matter of urgency and priority.

### **- International volunteer-supported teaching organizations are always very welcome in Africa**

Always welcome because they are the ones who can infuse enthusiasm for education and learning in our African communities. We need them to inspire and encourage the young to aspire towards higher learning and good education. The reality is that, out of the many international charity organizations that have come into Africa to work in different capacities, only a hand full of them deal directly in educational and school projects. Instead we have a growing number of those organizations that deal with sex-'education' and reproductive 'health'. So at 15% secondary education rate, we now appeal to the rich developed countries for more of real education and less of sex-education in Africa. We need organizations that will respect and preserve the African Culture of Life through any and all educational programs provided in Africa, while being mindful not to instil in the younger generation a set of values that will conflict with their own African culture which is inherently pro-life & pro-family.

### **-Increase in the number of Scholarships awarded for University Education**

University education is unaffordable to so many young Africans who really desire it. It is not cheap but it could in fact be considered a solid investment because it will ensure that in the next generation of Africans there will be men and women trained and specialized enough to pull their people out of the clutches of poverty. It means that a day will come when from one African nation to another there will be enough doctors and nurses to tend to the sick and enough midwives for safe deliveries and enough lawyers to defend the down-trodden and enough scientists to ensure scientific advancements and enough engineers to build up villages, roads and water wells. Surely this is a vision of Africa that we can all welcome.

Some of my young relatives and friends in Africa (like other children in other parts of the world) dream of growing up to become teachers, nurses and lawyers . To hear their beautiful and noble dreams always fills my heart with joy because I know that for most of them, their dreams and aspirations are inspired by the dire need that they see and experience in their own local communities where there are few teachers to train the young, few nurses to care for the sick and even fewer lawyers to defend the down-trodden. And the children somehow understand the strife and suffering around them, and so they want to be able to help, they want to be trained to help. But the bitter reality is that many of them will never get access to the education needed for them to become the teachers, nurses and lawyers that will build up their poverty-stricken towns and villages. I find it as (or even more) cruel and harsh than the pangs of hunger and the pains of disease. Because education gives much more than food and medicine, it gives livelihood and it bestows dignity to the African people. This is why it has become the dream of millions of African children who want to build up their communities in the future, just as it has become the desire of millions of African parents who want to see their children freed from the pit of poverty .

So we should dare to share this dream and desire with them to the point of joining our prayers and efforts to fighting the epic battle against poverty around the world.