

CONFERENCE OF SIERRA LEONE PRINCIPALS, MARCH 2014, MAKENI

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE AGENDA FOR PROSPERITY

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Mr. Chairman , Hon Minister of Education, Her Worship the Mayor of the municipality of Makeni, Chairperson of the Conference of Principals, Officers from the Ministry of Education , my dear principals of schools in Sierra Leone, distinguished ladies and gentlemen I bring you greetings from the University of Makeni. It is good to have you here in Makeni and on the grounds of UNIMAK . We wish you a happy stay and fruitful deliberations.

1. I am really humbled to be invited as a guest speaker at this National Conference of Principals of Secondary Schools in Sierra Leone on the theme: ‘ The Role of Education in the Agenda for Prosperity, the development plan of our country,’.

This Conference comes at a time when Sierra Leone is positioning itself to become a middle income country by 2035; and also at the moment when the debate about the post-millennium goals is ongoing in academia, in policy circles and in civil society. Indeed my friends, this is a moment of serious reflection on our past, present and future. I am glad to be part of this conversation.

2. Our vision of the ‘good society’ has been articulated in the Agenda for Prosperity, the third generation of our plan to reduce poverty , called our PRSPs. It is our development plan. A development plan with a history beginning with the Millennium development goals, Vision 2025, District Recovery Strategies, National Recovery Strategies, the Interim PRSP, PRSP 1, PRSP2, the third generation of PRSPs and now the Agenda for Prosperity (2013-2018). Our President, Dr Ernest B. Koroma, introducing this document notes that the ‘Agenda for Prosperity is the country’s one vision and the first five year road map to becoming a middle income country. The introductory message of the President on the Agenda for Prosperity is insightful and captures the heart, mind and spirit to be part of this agenda. He sets the tone for this journey. Let us begin by repeating his words:

“ As we embark on this epic journey to become a middle income country, let me remind fellow Sierra Leoneans that we have together – government and every stakeholder - committed ourselves to change , because prosperity does not pour like rain , and will not come to us , but we must go in search of it with determination. We must sweat it out with our hands, with our brains and with our minds. Our Agenda for Prosperity marks an end of the chapter of business as usual , and the dawn for a new Sierra Leone that have set out to embrace the values of innovation, of cultural renewal in the workplace and respect for public goods; and the realization that the end results of this new beginning is the extent to

which we double our efforts, and commit ourselves to the values of self-reliance and discipline.”

3. We can summarize this vision: Sierra Leone’s vision for 2013- 2018 is to become a middle-income country. It would be an inclusive, green country, with 80 % of the population above the poverty line. It would have gender equality, a well-educated, healthy population, good governance and rule of law, well developed infrastructure, macroeconomic stability with private –sector, export-led growth generating wide employment opportunities, there would be good environmental protection and responsible natural resource exploitation. The vision is articulated into eight pillars of the Agenda for Prosperity: 1 : Economic diversification to promote inclusive growth, 2. Managing Natural resources, 3. Accelerating Human Development, 4. International Competitiveness, 5. Labour and Employment 6. Strengthening Social Protection Systems, 7. Governance and Public Sector Reform, 8 Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment.

Our theme today must explore how can developing human capital, in this case education, empower our people to reduce poverty as well as accelerate the development of the millennium goals and help us attain a middle income status. Hence, the role of education in the Agenda for Prosperity. How can education promote economic diversification leading to creating jobs and reducing poverty; how can education promote responsible management of our natural resources, international competitiveness and the other pillars? Let us explore in the Agenda for prosperity what is the strategy to promote human development:

4. We would need to increase SL UNDP human development index from 0.33 to 0.62, the average level of middle income countries, will focus on improving health and education for all, and particularly for women and girls. Education access, equity and quality will be improved at all levels, achieving high literacy, and developing a labour force with the skills demanded by the employment-generating sectors of the economy. We can see that this vision would be achieved by the work of government, civil society, the private sector and the international committee. Public –private partnership is a key strategy in realizing this goal. This shows that neither the government nor the private sector can do it alone. We need all these drivers and actors together : government, the private sector, civil society, the international community.

5. What are the challenges of the education sector in this vision:

A high number of out-of school children of primary school age and low access to the secondary school level, especially by girls. 40 % of children start grade one at age seven or above; high repetition rates; low completion rates especially for girls at junior and senior secondary; low quality education at all levels; inadequate educational

infrastructure to effectively and efficiently deliver education ; instructional hours low and not used efficiently, mismatch between between skills supply and labour market demands (mining, agriculture,etc) high literacy rate among youths and adults; lack of governance and management capacity for education service delivery.

What are the objectives and strategies to address these challenges

6 Objectives and strategies to improve access to and quality of education will be as follows:

- a. Improve education access, completion, and equity of opportunities
- b. Make education more equitable and accessible
- c. Improving education completion rates especially for girls
- d. Improving teaching/ learning quality education at all levels
- e. Make student learning more relevant : prioritize science and math and technology for both boys and girls
- f. Ensure adequate school contact hours
- g. Improve education and administration
- h. Labour market skills.

It is interesting to note that Sierra Leone's budget for the financial year 2014 with the theme 'improving the livelihood of Youth, women and our Workforce', subsidizes 18,000 University students, provides school fees subsidy for about 1, 350, 000 school children , examination fees for WASCE, girl child program, examination fees for NPSE and BECE and so on ... Much has been done since the war but there is still so much to do.

This same budget affirms that " the shortage of relevant skills has been identified as a major constraint that undermines the competitiveness of our companies and industries . While there are many Sierra Leoneans looking for jobs, many employers cannot find workers with the right skills to match available vacancies. This partly explained by the fact that our training programs have not been sufficiently aligned to the skills employers need. This in turn has partly contributed to the high level of the unemployment especially among our youths and women.'

7. I hope at this Conference every principal would have time to reflect and ask ourselves where are we at in achieving these goals, objectives. What are the strategies we need to address our educational challenges. Our major task is to address where are we at in our institutions: Here we need a comprehensive and holistic approach. Know the challenges at all levels so that we can plan well for our schools and we can contribute to achieving the vision of our country.

8 . These challenges are also reflected in what is written in the Education Sector Plan, the road map for the education sector in Sierra Leone from 2007- 2015. The basic challenges are that of equity, quality and access.

The ESP lists the following major challenges:

Staffing, access, finance, gender issues, geographical priority issues, providing for those with special needs and monitoring and evaluation.

Let us specifically look at your domain, post primary education:

We cannot underestimate the importance of post-primary education by the fact that its existence motivates children to complete primary school and its graduates provide the human capital necessary for the development of the country.

The junior and primary education are considered as the basic education to be provided for all children . This is the minimum level of education to be provided for all.

9. The key challenges in the Junior Secondary schools are :

ACCESS and EQUITY

Inadequate number and distribution of schools: 4,000 primary schools feeding in to less than 300 secondary schools.

Improving the NER

The majority of children in JSS are well above the official age for the level 12-14

Strengthening government interventions

Gender parity , Completion, Improving repetition rates

QUALITY

Getting more instructional hours, Staff, Teaching and learning materials in the school Curriculum, Poor public examination results, Weak institutional capacity, Weak financial management

10. A look at senior secondary schools:

The aim of SSS includes strengthening the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired at the junior secondary level as well as equipping students with the skills that are in line with the manpower needs of the country.

The key challenges are:

Access and equity

Increase the number of schools and facilities

Improve net enrolment rate

Gender parity

Completion

Quality

Teaching staff, inadequate facilities need for learning assessments, effective quality assurance system.

There has been great improvements as we have seen after the conflict : financing of education has greatly improved , the payment of fees for public exams has also increased, the verifications exercises have led to sanity in the payment of salaries and now it is regular. So, there has been much improvement. But we can do more . There are many challenges . Given our circumstances , what are the things that can work.? What is needed? There is need to use our resources wisely to exit fragility, be innovative, creative, relevant, strengthening partnership and improve financial plan for education.

In a recent study on the Prospects for Africa's 26 Fragile States(Jakkie Cillers and Timothy D), four countries might exit fragility on a path to greater resilience by or before 2050 , namely Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Liberia. However the report points out that there are certain recommendations for these countries to exit fragility : Some of these countries with possibility of gas and oil revenue, other mineral resources must direct cash transfers to address chronic poverty, design , monitor and implement clear wealth sharing agreement for improving natural-resource governance, institutionalize and build state capacity to stop corruption. This report notes and this is vital for the education sector that the key to managing non-renewable resources successfully is a long –term national strategy , embracing all stakeholders that can convert temporary natural resource wealth into the permanent human capital that can extend opportunities across generations.

3. Creativity.

How can we improve the skills set and, knowledge of our students. There is need to help them with the basics: reading , writing and mathematics. How can we make use of summer , the long break, increase hours ? How can we help create libraries where our students can at least read something Can we create a science resource center where at least we can use some of our local materials , resources to build the scientific culture. I say the scientific culture of analyzing, gathering data, testing assumptions and be able to predict. This is the scientific culture.

There are many community radios in almost every district. I have tried at Radio Maria to have a team prepare study sessions on courses where it would be difficult to find teachers: study time in economics, mathematics, chemistry, accounting etc. These well prepared classes through the radio could reach almost all the districts. Let us use our radios creatively. We cannot afford wasting time. Introduce our students to public lectures, debates , drama and other methodologies for learning. Have we ever invited the education secretary to discuss policy notes with our teachers, academic staff retreat, evaluation exercises for our teachers, setting up a strategic plan for our schools. How have we positioned our schools to use the opportunities around us. These are the things that could be done.

4. Innovation:

We are preparing our students for life and so we must not be afraid to innovate.

Innovation is not recklessness, is not necessarily doing away with the past.

Innovation is looking at possibilities, seeing challenges as possibilities. Innovation is to be strategic, looking at gaps and deficits and addressing these gaps and deficits.

This is to think outside the box. Release the imagination of our children. For these we must allow and create an enabling environment for creativity and innovation.

This is about quality. What is quality and how can we promote it in our schools.

What policies can we innovate in our schools to attract science students. Could we provide scholarships for science students.

Begin a lab for creative writing skills

How do we link the universities and the secondary schools? The mathematics campaign and English programs. Reading clubs, mathematics club etc

3. Prioritise public-private partnerships.

4. Leverage on rents paid by companies to land owners, paramount chiefs and their chieftain committees, district councils and strengthen corporate social responsibility

5. Leverage funding from the transformation fund for education. The transformation fund. I quote again from the 2014 budget: "to ensure the prudent management of natural resources revenues, government will establish a transformation and development fund. All natural resources revenues will be deposited into the TDF, which will be used to finance transformational projects, stabilize government expenditures especially during years when revenues are less than expected and to save for future generations".

5. Government needs to scale up investment on education in order to break the cycle of poverty and fast track economic transformation. Here critical trade-offs have to be made. An educated population will make better preventative health decisions, adopt better family planning practices, can create the space for partnership with government, demand accountability from all levels of leadership, create the middle class, create a modern ICT based economy rather than a cash based one. Indeed an educated population can better work to achieve the Agenda for Prosperity.

Long live the Conference of principals of Sierra Leone. Long Live Sierra Leone. God Bless you.