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THE OCCASION OF THE RE-LAUNCHING OF THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMME

The occasion of the re-launching of the Universal Basic Education Programme is a moment of reflection and renewal. It is a time to look back at the progress made since the programme's inception in 1971, when it started with 10 million children in 100 countries, and to look forward to the challenges ahead. The programme has achieved significant milestones, but there is still much work to be done. We must ensure that every child has access to quality education, and that the programme is sustainable and effective. This is a shared responsibility, and we must work together to make it a reality.

THE OCCASION OF THE RELAUNCHING OF THE
UNIVERSITY BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMME

**ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
PRESIDENT OLUSEGUN OBASANJO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE RE-LAUNCHING
OF THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMME
IN SOKOTO
ON THURSDAY, 30TH SEPTEMBER, 1999**

Your Excellency, The Vice-President of Nigeria,
Your Excellencies, State Governors,
Your Eminence, the Sultan of Sokoto,
Members of the Federal Executive Council,
Esteemed Traditional Rulers,
Distinguished Legislators and Jurists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Exactly 22 years ago this month, I had the privilege of launching the Universal Primary Education Programme of the then Federal Military Government, of which I was the Head. The justification for that programme, at that time, remains much the same as it is today. There is a continuing need to provide for our children, and indeed for all our citizens, the basic educational skills they require to be useful citizens in their communities, their country, and in the world at large. Education, however, is not just a matter of acquiring skills. Education is better understood when we see it also as a means of instilling, especially in our young ones, the importance of a number of fundamental values, such as devotion to the well-being of our motherland ; respect for our Constitution and the importance of democratic governance ; a sense of the dignity of work and moral uprightness ; as well as respect for the rights of other citizens.

Twenty-two years ago, our objectives were more modest, dictated as they were by what we perceived to be our needs at that time. We were anxious to ensure that every Nigerian child, from age six, attended primary school and remained there for the next six years, under a free education scheme funded by the federal and state governments. It is a mark of the spectacular success of that programme that, between 1977, when it started, and 1980, it recorded an expansion in the number of children in primary schools from 6 million in 1977, to 12 million in 1980.

The UPE Programme was, by the middle of the 1980s, however, bedevilled by a number of unforeseen and avoidable difficulties, which rendered it virtually

unsustainable. First of all, the huge population explosion of the 1980s meant that there was suddenly a large army of primary school age children who could not readily be accommodated within the existing school structure. There were not enough schools, and there was a severe scarcity of trained and qualified teachers. Secondly, the decline in national revenue made it impossible to allocate sufficient funds to expansion of the education scheme, not to speak of improving the quality of the programme. Finally, political instability in the country led to utter confusion concerning what priority should be given to the advancement of education at all levels.

Launching the UBE here in Sokoto today is not an accident. The Sokoto Caliphate was based among other things on learning and scholarship. Its leaders were renowned scholars of high standards and sense of justice. Regrettably, we of this generation seemed to have abandoned those lofty ideals. It is the determination of this government to restore within our society the interest and dignity of learning and scholarship. Our efforts cannot, however, yield the desired results without the awareness and the full support and dedication of all our leaders at every level of our community. We cannot afford to fail this time around.

It is also worth noting that Sokoto State has the lowest primary school enrollment, as it had twenty-two years ago. This situation is no credit to the leadership that spanned that period, and must not be allowed to continue.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a most unfortunate decline in the education sector. The Minister of Education has already been giving the details of the statistics of this decline. What they clearly suggest is that if we do not do something now, to arrest it, Nigeria will be ill-prepared and ill-informed to take on the twenty-first century.

This Administration has therefore chosen to pick up the challenge to arrest the decline and decay in our education sector, as well as expand and improve upon the UPE scheme.

The Universal Basic Education Programme, which we are gathered here to launch today, is almost the same as the old UPE Scheme. It is "free" and universal like before, but now in addition, it will be compulsory. But having carefully reviewed our current national needs, our Administration has decided to give it a broader focus. Thus, the new UBE now extends to all children from age six to age 15. It will accommodate them from Primary School to Junior Secondary School. It will devote as much attention to producing trained and qualified teachers, as to providing a large enough number of schools to take in all children who are eligible for enrollment in them. It embraces comprehensive adult literacy programme.

Funds will be made available for properly equipping the schools. The schools and the teachers will be required to teach their wards not only the standard but traditional components of knowledge. They will also be expected to teach them the responsibilities of citizenship in a complex society such as ours. Religion and morality cannot be divorced from school curriculum without education becoming hollow.

The implementation of this programme must be anchored at the community level, local level and state level to ensure close involvement and supervision for success and sustenance.

The new UBE is an ambitious programme, and a very costly scheme indeed. But it is the firm belief of this Administration that any amount of money wisely spent on the education of our children is a legitimate investment in our future. For without a solid educational foundation, nothing else that we do could prepare this country adequately for facing up to the complex challenges of the coming years. In the true sense of the word, education cannot be free. Someone is paying for it directly or indirectly, in cash or in kind. Education is too serious a responsibility and too heavy a burden to be left in the hands of teachers or parents alone. Everybody must chip in. But no one should shirk his or her own responsibility.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I was exceedingly privileged 22 years ago, to have launched the first edition of the national Universal Primary Education Scheme in the country. It is with the greatest sense of humility, and with the profoundest hopes for the future greatness of this country, Nigeria, that I now launch the Universal Basic Education Programme. And I do so conscious of the Chinese adage, popularised by the late Tai Solarin which says :

"If you are planning for one year,
Plant rice ;
If you are planning for five years,
Plant trees ;
If you are planning for the future
Educate your children."

I thank you. May God bless you all.

