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Sustaining Global Skills Inequality? Skills Development and Skills Protectionism in the Nigerian Multinational Corporate Sector

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Abstract

The vital role of skills for socio-economic transformation is well espoused in the literature; however little scholarly attention has been paid to the international dichotomies in skills and the dynamics that underpin them. In many countries in the Global South, there is a plethora of liberal policies that seek to attract industrial investment by corporations in the Global North, the hope often being that the development of vital skills will result from such investments. Yet, studies have shown that in many developing countries, years of active business involvement by multinational corporations have not had the desired effects. Against this backdrop, this article examines the skills development programmes and strategies in Nigeria's multinational corporate sector vis-à-vis the dominant national discourses on skills development in Nigeria. The focus is on the extent to which multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in Nigeria have facilitated the acquisition of vital skills. From interviews conducted in key Nigerian national manpower policy agencies and two multinational companies, with long active industrial operations in Nigeria, the article argues that despite their long existence, MNCs operating in Nigeria still source vital skills from their home countries. Besides, the levels of investment in skills development in the local economy suggest a possibility of skills protectionism – an active or unwitting process of 'hoarding' vital skills. The article thus highlights the challenges and contradictions of economic calculations of corporations and national human capital development imperatives.

Keywords: Skills, Skills development, skills protectionism, skills inequality, development, Multinational Corporations, Nigeria

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Résumé

Le rôle essentiel des compétences pour la transformation socio-économique est bien en évidence dans la littérature, mais, les chercheurs ont accordé peu d'attention aux dichotomies internationales sur les compétences et à la dynamique qui les sous-tend. Dans de nombreux pays du Sud, il existe une pléthore de politiques libérales visant à attirer les investissements industriels des entreprises du Nord, dans l'espoir que le développement de compétences essentielles découlera de tels investissements. Cependant, des études ont montré que, dans de nombreux pays en développement, les entreprises multinationales n'ont pas apporté les effets escomptés depuis des années. Dans ce contexte, le présent article examine les programmes et stratégies de développement des compétences dans le secteur des entreprises multinationales au Nigeria par rapport aux discours nationaux dominants sur le développement des compétences au Nigeria. L'accent porte sur le niveau de facilitation d'acquisition de compétences essentielles par les compagnies multinationales opérant au Nigeria. D'après des entretiens menés dans des agences nationales nigerianes chargées de la politique de main-d'œuvre et dans deux sociétés multinationales actives depuis longtemps au Nigeria, l'article affirme que, malgré leur longue présence, les entreprises multinationales opérant au Nigeria continuent de se procurer les compétences essentielles dans leur pays d'origine. En outre, les niveaux d'investissement dans le développement de compétences dans l'économie locale laissent supposer une possibilité de protectionnisme des compétences – un processus actif ou involontaire de « thésaurisation » de compétences essentielles. L'article met ainsi en évidence les défis et les contradictions des calculs économiques des entreprises et des impératifs nationaux de développement du capital humain.

Mots-clés : compétences, développement de compétences; protectionnisme des compétences, inégalité des compétences, développement, sociétés multinationales, Nigeria

Introduction

The global environment depicts that there is not only inequality in access to the basics of life but also to political and economic resources. The globalisation process has further widened the disparity in access to societal resources including skills. Indeed, skills have become the twenty-first century global currency of modern society that is skills and knowledge driven (Khilji, Kakar and Subhan 2012; Brewer 2013). Conscious of the skills challenge in developing countries such as Nigeria, efforts are made through policy statements and diplomatic shuttles to attract investment from multinational corporations. This, in the main, is in recognition of the vital role of the multinational corporation (MNC) sector in national economic and technological development. Beyond providing employment and generation of income, it is believed that MNCs promote skills development and facilitate technology spillover. Therefore, a number of laws have been enacted aimed at maximising the benefits of multinational business activities. Such legislation or enactments in Nigeria include the Expatriate Quota Regime/Regulation and Local Content among others. These are official policies formulated to optimise multinational investment benefits beyond the economic imperative. These initiatives arose as a result of consciousness by the Nigerian government of the need to initiate appropriate policies aimed at ensuring that the gap between the advanced countries of Europe and America, often referred to as the 'North', is reduced.

The classification of countries as 'North' and 'South' describes the different level of economic development of countries in the world. According to Arrighi, Silver and Brewer (2003), these concepts emerged after the Second World War when the need arose to incorporate the developing countries of Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia into development agenda, for these countries not to remain mere suppliers of raw materials – a peripheral role they have played for centuries – to the advanced countries of the world. The North describes the developed countries of Europe and North America that are rich, technologically advanced, and therefore act as the beacon for the rest of the world. The developed countries' technological advantage is used to sustain their dominance. The North controls a significant proportion of global wealth and investment and still continues to invest significantly in research and development (R&D) for the generation of new ideas. On the other side are the developing countries referred to as the South that are characterised by low level of investments, a low level of education and technological know-how, and remain dismally underdeveloped. They are poor countries and are therefore engaged in low levels of production with the use of relatively simple tools at subsistence level. These countries are generally lacking in skills. The South therefore looks to the North for technology and finance, skills and expertise to engage meaningfully in productive activities. Thus, the superior-subordinate relationship is perpetuated to the detriment of the South, as experienced especially in Africa, with specific focus on Nigeria presumed to be Africa's biggest economy (*The Guardian* 2014). The Global North has been able to attain a pre-eminent position as a result of its skills advantage which has been deployed for wealth creation and improvement in the quality of life. Conscious of the potential of its skills advantage, such skills are now being protected to maintain a competitive advantage through patents and other instruments of multilateral and global institutions such as the Trade Related and Investment Measure (TRIM), the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) among others (Greenaway 1992). Notwithstanding its skills advantage, the North continues to invest heavily in education, research and capacity building to make advancements. This is how the North–South divide has been sustained and the South has not been able to bridge the gap.

In light of the above, this paper examines the unending global skills inequality with specific focus on the MNC sector in Nigeria. It argues that despite the long existence of MNCs in Nigeria that are custodians of modern skills, the anticipated development of skills by the locals has remained largely unattainable. Despite monitoring frameworks and legislation, it concludes that due to specific dynamics within the MNC sector, there seems to be some forms of skills protectionism that helps in sustaining the skills divide and thereby perpetuating global skills inequality. It therefore advocates that concerted efforts are required to reverse the trend and close the skills gap. The paper is anchored in the protectionist narrative as against the free trade narrative and thus provides a thoughtful explanation for subtle practices inherent in the MNC sector that tend to perpetuate inequality. The paper is based on qualitative data sourcing and analysis, through detailed interviews with government establishments concerned with skills development and utilisation. The two MNCs are Lafarge Cement Wapco Nigeria and Unilever Nigeria Plc; these are among the dominant MNCs in Nigeria with several decades of successful business operations.

Skills and Socio-economic Development

Scholars agree that skills are important or a necessary ingredient for socio-economic development for both individuals and nations (see Page 1994: 180; Spero and Hart 1997: 249–55; Agbodike 1998:168; Blomstrom and Kokko 2001: 9). Skills transform lives and are an important driver of economies and development in the current technological age. Skills affect people's lives and the well-being of nations in ways that go far beyond monetary value (Ejere 2011; see also Kapstein 2002). Skills contribute to economic growth both directly, through increased productivity, and indirectly, by creating greater capacity of workers and firms to adopt new technologies and ways of working and to spur innovation (OECD 2010; Martinez-Fernandez and Sharpe 2010). Empirical evidence is consistent across a wide range of countries confirming that skills have a profound relationship with economic and social outcomes in different contexts and institutions (OECD 2012:10–11). Conversely, however, Quintini (2011) found skills shortages and mismatches between the supply of and demand for skills as impediments to socio-economic transformation which tend to lower potential for growth and amounting to a waste of important resources.

Developing skills is critical for developing countries, particularly in Africa, for the much desired technological transfer, domiciliation of technology and emergence of indigenous technology among other reasons. The global economic crises and associated unemployment, which has been on the increase particularly in Africa, have more than before increased the urgency for pursuing a better skills development agenda (OECD 2012). There is need for a new skills development pathway that will make for wider employment opportunities, stem rising income inequalities, generate employment and reduce the disparity between the North and the South.

The desire for skills development has also propelled the government to look outwards for foreign direct investment (FDI) through MNCs. The government is conscious of the potential contributions of FDI to economic development as FDI is now widely recognised due to declining concessional aid to developing countries (Muogbo and Kayar 2012:1). FDI through MNCs potentially boosts the growth of a country by crowding in other investments with an overall increase in total investments, as well as hopefully creating positive 'spill-over effects' from the transfer of technology, knowledge and skills to domestic firms (Dulupçu and Demirel 2009). It can also stimulate economic growth by spurring competition, innovation and improvements to a country's productivity. The indirect impacts of FDI through MNCs on the domestic economy, particularly in the area of developing local skills, are the main reasons for the intense political focus on MNCs in Nigeria; and this may well account for the high levels of public subsidies and promotional activities to attract investors, especially after the return to democracy rule in 1999. Among the incentives are tax holidays, tariff protection, accelerated depression allowances and import duty relief for imported inputs (Aniekan 2011: 182; Fouda 2012).

On the flip side are scholars who view skills development and a whole range of other activities of MNCs as a form of neo-colonialism. This has led to calls on governments to regulate the activities of MNC subsidiaries in their territories as a way of curbing 'negative' activities (Prasad, Pisani and Prasad 2008; Erunke and Kigbu 2012). Some scholars suspect that these companies are not necessarily concerned with 'real' socio-economic transformation of the host country, but are driven by the desire for profit, even if this is by exploiting institutional and policy weaknesses in the host country (see Kapstein 2002; Stiglitz 2002; Bakan 2004). MNCs are big organisations and some have investments that are higher than the GDP of many developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Stiglitz 2007: 17). With this development, how could the vital skills and technological know-how anticipated to accrue from MNCs to assist in the socio-economic transformation of host countries be readily available? Scholars emphasise, for instance, that skills development for the transformation of society must incorporate technology and be geared towards the empowerment of people, reducing inequalities, alleviating poverty and promoting economic growth (Akpomuvie 2011; Siyanbola *et al.* 2012).

Based on these divergent and seemingly contradictory arguments, this paper examines the discourse and practice of skills development in the MNC sector. The focus is on the skills development programmes and strategies of Lafarge Cement Wapco Nigeria and Unilever Nigeria Plc. The paper aims at highlighting the relevance of their skills development programmes and strategies to the developmental aspirations of the country towards bridging the gap in skills disparity between the North and the South. In addition, the paper also seeks to ascertain whether the MNCs' training and skills development programmes being implemented in Nigeria have wider social and economic application in the national quest for skills in order to reduce the global skills disparities.

Protectionism Narrative

Protectionism is an amalgam of economic policies, usually adopted by different countries, with the aim of restraining trade between nations in the national social and economic interest. It is usually implemented through methods such as increasing tariffs on imported goods, restrictive quotas, import restriction and a number of other restrictive government regulations specifically designed to discourage imports, and protect local markets and emerging local companies from foreign competitors who already have a comparative advantage (Baier and Bergstrand 2001; Jing and Yuduo 2012; Fouda 2012).

Skills protectionism, therefore, explains the root of the contentious debate on multinational operations especially in developing countries of the world, perhaps because of the safeguards and protection often sought for business advantage that are detrimental to the economy of host countries. The WTO and other member countries, especially from the North, have identified aspects of the TRIM, many of which are considered inadequate for the economies of developing countries and have advocated for liberalisation. Yet a number of these developing countries have advocated for the retention of TRIM while developed countries want it abolished (Malhotra 2003: 238). Abolition of TRIM will result in uninhibited access of developed countries to the economies of developing countries and could result in untoward consequences for developing countries. The technological advantage of developed countries could be deployed to crowd in cheap goods that could culminate in the collapse of local production initiatives.

Japan, and some emerging economies, have however emphasised the use of regional arrangements as alternative measures of protection and control. The argument is that regions are better equipped than multilateral or global institutions to ensure safeguards and protection (Latif 2011). Regionalisation of TRIM requires governments within regions to make binding commitments rather than relying on global multilateral ideas of TRIM and other global instruments (Chase 2004:1). It is argued that TRIM is a political economic agenda that is rooted in tariffs and other border barriers, despite the existence of individual nations' industrial policies (Guisinger 1986). Guisinger (1986: 86) further emphasises that TRIMs are 'confidential undertakings negotiated between foreign investors and host governments on a case-by-case basis; and such arrangements between foreign investors and host governments are neither published nor made public'.

The secrecy surrounding TRIM is an indication that it would likely be negatively inclined and detrimental to the socio-economic environment of developing countries. In the opinion of Greenaway (1992:145), TRIM 'interacts with other interventions' to manipulate the environmental conditions in favour of foreign investors. Entry restriction of other firms is another form of protectionism which MNCs also enjoy in order to further their interest motive in host countries (Chase 2004). According to Chase (2004: 12), protectionism in multinational operations manifests in a number of ways including transitional protection to enable MNCs to recoup investment. In addition, other forms of protectionism noted by scholars are: lobbying and 'paradiplomacy' to ensure that state laws, institutions and government policies sustain their businesses (Stopford 1998–1999: 12–24; Boddewyn 1988: 341–63; Hammarlund 2005:240), and coding of productive technology and inventions of their R&D outcomes to ensure non-replication for the company's maximum advantage (Kapfer 2006:7).

The protectionism narrative helps explain some of the unspoken aspects of why MNCs are established in some locations and how they ensure monopolies in such environments. It equally points to the reality, or perhaps inability, of governments to act against MNCs even when they are involved in activities considered to be at variance with collective interests. Examples abound in Nigeria's Niger Delta region where many oil companies have been accused of neglect, environmental pollution and degradation. The Nigerian government has not been able to act against the oil companies despite agitations from the host communities and NGOs. It equally explains why, despite so many skills development institutions and long years of multinational operations in the Nigerian oil sector, it is still dominated largely by expatriates. Notwithstanding the expatriate quota regulation, enactment of local content legislation and setting up of local content commission, foreign oil companies are still the custodians of skills in the oil sector, Nigeria's main source of foreign earnings.

The protectionist narrative is fully business-oriented; it is pro-investors. However, from the profit drive of the narrative, an inference could be drawn that MNCs will protect skills from competitors and the host environment if it will facilitate the maximisation of business interests in both the short and long run. In addition, it could also be deduced that R&D investments and innovative activities of MNCs in the home country are meant to ensure protection of such inventions. Also, patent rights which MNCs enjoy for a long time as a result of innovation, are equally meant to ensure that the investments in R&D and the emerging inventions are protected to rake in extensive profits. Whilst skills protectionism reveals some of the underlying philosophy behind the MNCs' activities, it also provides the basis for understanding the North–South dichotomy and the underlying factor of inequality within the global environment.

Therefore, the Nigerian government has adopted different strategies aimed at attracting MNCs that are regarded as the custodians of modern skills and technology as a way of tapping their skills advantage. The concern of this paper is that after several years of MNC operations in Nigeria, the development of skills necessary for anticipated socio-economic transformation and development has remained a challenge. Skills protectionism therefore provides a useful analytical model to unravel the dynamics of skills development in the MNC sector (from the perspective of the developing world), which accounts for the sustenance of global inequality.

Methodology

This article examines training and skills development programmes within the Nigerian MNC sector. The aim is to be able to draw inference as to whether skills are being developed in line with national aspiration for skills development in Nigeria. In addition, it will ascertain whether perhaps there are practices contrary to national aspirations that point to some forms of protectionism in the skills development practice of MNCs which perpetuate global skills inequality. As noted above, the MNCs in the study are global player in the MNC sector with several decades of business operations across the globe.

The article draws from a completed doctoral thesis and a qualitative research methodology was adopted in gathering and analysing the data. The fieldwork for the collection of the data covered a five months period between the months of February and June 2013. Qualitative methods of research seek to explain a phenomenon of study from the contextual perspective of the research participants. It is flexible and allows for interactions with the research participants (see Pope and Mays 2000; Babbie and Mouton 2001). In addition, a qualitative method allows for in-depth probing on issues that might arise; and allows for complexity and unanticipated discoveries to be factored into a qualitative interpretive research approach which will in turn enrich analysis and explanation. Important attributes of this research approach are that the research is conducted in the natural setting of participants; the focus is on process rather than outcome; and the actors' perceptions and views or 'emic' perspectives are emphasised. The primary concern is to understand social phenomenon in relation to the specific context rather than attempting to generalise (Babbie and Mouton 2001: 270).

Both primary and secondary data were collected. Primary data were collected by means of key informant and in-depth semi-structured interviews. A review of relevant literature also provided useful secondary data. Five key informant interviews were held with the government policy making establishment concerned with skills development and utilisation in Nigeria. The key informants helped to shed light on the government's orientation on training and skills development as expected by employers of labour. In order to unravel the training programmes and strategies in the Nigerian MNC sector, a total of 19 in-depth interviews were held with organised labour, organised private sector and MNCs. All the organisations were purposely selected because they are household names in the different sectors of the Nigerian economy with long periods of business activities. They are not only vital to the issue of skills development and utilisation, but they have a large labour force with a high level of attraction to job seekers. The participants were senior officials whose responsibilities were central to skills development and utilisation in their respective companies and organisations.

Data collected from these skills development and utilisation constituencies were very useful as they are all vital agencies through which skills development programmes and strategies in the Nigerian MNC sector could be unravelled holistically. The state, through the numerous institutions and agencies, sets the platform through the enactment of a policy framework for other skills development constituencies to operate. The MNCs take advantage of the enabling environment created to set up enterprises. With the establishment of enterprises, organised labour provides the manpower to make these organisations function. The organised private sector is the umbrella association for all operators in the business environment of a country. The interviews in these relevant skills development and utilisation constituencies aimed to ascertain the level of their involvement in multinationals' employee training and skills development with the aim of highlighting the inherent contradictions in their programmes. The data analysis followed the thematic discourses that emerged, an approach suitable for qualitative interpretive discourse analysis (see Babbie and Mouton 2001; Mason 2002). This method of data analysis allowed for reflections on the key issues of skills for empowerment; skills for employment and job mobility (portability of skills); skills for entrepreneurship and skills for lifelong usage. Other vital issues that emerged from the literature are also reflected in the interview responses. The discussion of findings was presented based on important responses from the different interviews.

Multinational Corporate Sector and Skills Development: State Discourse and Expectation

The findings are presented and analysed according to the themes that emerged from the data obtained from the different categories of respondents as indicated in the previous section. In addition, relevant secondary data are utilised to ensure substantive data analysis.

Skills for Technology Transfer

Part of the strategy of the Nigerian government to foster skills development is partnering with and encouraging MNCs to come into the country and establish industrial ventures with the hope that these companies will come with their advanced technologies into the country. It is believed that technology transfer will occur through MNCs as the employees in this sector will be trained while working with expatriates. Employees would therefore acquire relevant skills. This is the idea embedded in the concept of 'technology transfer'. A senior official of the Federal Ministry of Trade and Investment in Abuja said:

> What the Ministry is concerned about is trying to get Foreign Direct Investment as well as create domestic industries. So, we are trying to create conducive environment for that. When these investors come in and get

> started, there are some incentives in place for them. Agreeing to come and set up in Nigeria and not other places is the first step. Through their businesses, they create jobs for our people. Apart from employing our people, they are expected to transfer skills to these people. The idea is: don't just bring your own people and evacuate the money out back there and leave us the way you met us. After a while let our own people be able to do these things rather than relying on expatriates.

To further highlight the government's effort in the area of skills development, the official added:

> The government inaugurated a committee on communication called Digital and it is responsible for switch over from analogue to digital. The cut-off date has been fixed for June 2015 by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The committee is to work out how to manufacture set top boxes. There was the concern that we might not have a Nigerian company with the capacity to do that, we are looking forward to collaborating with foreign investors to get it done in Nigeria such that the company will be established here in Nigeria to manufacture these boxes; they will also be required to train our people on how to produce these set top boxes and also how to repair them. This is a practical example of skills technology transfer and skills development because there is going to be a whole market by the time we move to that stage of production of set top boxes. We will have people who can fix the digital boxes, people who can install those devices. We don't have those skills now but we would need to have them before 2015.

The above response by a senior government official clearly depicts the hopes and aspirations of government towards ensuring that there is technology transfer to the country through MNCs. Another view on the transfer of technology to the locals was expressed by a senior official of the ITF, one of the government agencies concerned with the process of ensuring technology transfer:

> The staff of ITF, most especially those that are involved in training are trained in developed and developing countries worldwide so that the skills that are being practised outside there can be brought home. Those that are trained, when they come back, they make sure that whatever they learnt, they replicate it and ensure that it suits our own work here. That is the reason why most of our centres of the Industrial Training Fund are equipped. Some of them are equipped as what you have outside the country so that the technology that is being practised in developed and other developing countries are also available within Nigeria.

The two interview responses revealed the strong desire of government to ensure that the country makes advancements in technological acquisition by tapping from the advanced countries of the world. This is a strategy of bridging the skills gap and reducing skills disparity and inequality. With the establishment of MNC ventures, it is hoped that technical know-how and skills transfer will accrue to the country.

Skills for Empowerment

The expectation of government is that partnering with MNCs will culminate in the development of the skills of Nigerians such that they will be empowered. Through empowering Nigerians, inequality within the country and by extension the global arena will be reduced. This was explicitly stated by a senior official of the Federal Ministry of Employment and Productivity:

> The idea of establishing the various industrial skills centres in different parts of the country is to create wider avenues for many Nigerians to acquire vocational skills, craft or trades to empower themselves and make them productive. Government can no longer provide jobs for everybody. A person trained in carpentry, mechatronics, auto-mechanics, automobile repairs or plumbing is empowered and competent to set up his own business and even employ others.

A similar line of thinking was picked up at the ITF during an interview with a senior official, he said:

> Through the training at the industrial skills centres, the trainees are empowered. In addition, the Centre is in collaboration with the Nigerian Employers' Consultative Association (NECA) through a programme known as 'Start Your Own Business Plan'. Under this programme, trainees at the Industrial Skills Centres will be required to write their own business plans. These plans will be scrutinised and the trainees with the business plans considered viable are supported with the basic requirements to start their own businesses. In this way, it is not only imparting skills for empowerment but also assisting the trainees to be self-employed and even generating employment for others, possibly.

As highlighted above, these strategies of government are to ensure inequality is reduced through the empowerment of Nigerians, especially youth who constitute a substantial proportion of the country's population.

Skills for Employment and Job Mobility (Portability of Skills)

Among the discourses in human capital formation aspiration in Nigeria is the issue of skills development for employment mobility. It is a vital discourse that has attracted the attention of the global body concerned with labour issues – the International labour Organization (ILO). Developing skills that have wider applicability and employment choices has the potential of reducing inequality and enabling the economic and social transformation of any nation. The quest for skills that would facilitate employment mobility has been necessitated not only by rapid changes in the application of productive technologies in organisations, global market trends and high levels of unemployment especially among youths, but by a rising trend of migration as well. Portability of skills gives access to employment for skilled employees who can be deployed productively in different jobs, occupations or industries. Skills that are portable are of immense value as they contribute to human development, empower people, broaden individual employees' choices and capabilities, and empower employees to realise their potential (Simatele 2015).

Considering the importance of skills development for employment mobility (portability of skills), a key-informant of the Federal Ministry of Employment and Productivity stated that:

> The various Industrial Skills Centres being operated by the parastatals under different ministries provide holistic training to the trainees. Besides specific vocational and technical skills that make them professionals, towards the end of their programmes they are usually exposed to management and entrepreneurial skills which will help facilitate adaptation of their technical skills. It will also facilitate self-employment.

This statement obtained from the Ministry was in line with the view of a senior official of the ITF, who said:

> A person trained in auto-mechanics will be able to apply the knowledge in different organisations with mechanical equipment. Not only are they given entrepreneurial skills to be able to manage businesses, they are also encouraged to form cooperative societies as avenues of sourcing credit facilities for individuals' establishment of businesses.

The above responses revealed the aspirations of the Nigerian government towards ensuring that Nigerians, especially the youth, acquire skills that are portable and adaptable for use to ensure their survival within the economy. The entrepreneurial skills incorporated help to ensure holistic acquisition of technical skills and management ability to advance in life. With this training, those who successfully go through the programme will not be subjected to the challenge of protectionism which those who are unskilled are more vulnerable to, and which perpetuates inequality.

Multinational Corporate Sector: Discourse and Practice of Skills Development

Skills for Technology Transfer

The issue of skills for technology transfer emerged from the interview responses from MNCs. The expectation in Nigeria, as in other developing countries, is that with the establishment of MNC ventures, technical knowledge and skills transfer to the country will be generated (Akpomuvie 2011; Rugraff and Hansen 2011). However, despite the number of MNCs operating in Nigeria and the existence of different government and private establishments promoting skills development, the reality on the ground is that the skills challenge is persistent. This then raises several questions: could something be missing between the programmes of skills development institutions and MNCs skills development strategies in Nigeria? The researcher probed this issue during an interview with a Manager at Lafarge. He responded:

> There are two processes through which technology transfer could happen in Lafarge. In the first instance, Lafarge has two highly developed technical centres in Paris, France, the headquarters of Lafarge, and Cairo, in Egypt. Officials are sent to those technical centres to acquire knowledge about latest developments within the industry. When they return, they are expected to train others about such innovations. Secondly, a 'Coach' could be requested or sent down to an area of operation to train the people on ground. With these, the newest knowledge is imparted in an area of operation.

The response of the Lafarge official was in agreement with that of a manager in Unilever Nigeria Plc:

> Whenever a new machine is to be brought into the company for production, the core staff that will be working with the machine are usually sent to the manufacturer of the equipment who will train them on how to use the equipment before it is brought into the factory. This affords them opportunity of interacting with manufacturers acquiring knowledge about the equipment.

The two responses are approaches through which employees of local subsidiaries of MNCs in Nigeria could tap skills and technological advantages from the companies' international operations.

Skills for Empowerment

For the MNCs, skills development and training of employees was an important objective and critical to the functioning of the companies. It was a significant part of corporate citizenship. The MNCs claimed enormous involvement and credit for developing skills of their employees. A manager in Lafarge Cement Wapco pointed out:

> Here in Lafarge, our workers are multi-skilled as they work in different sections of the factory and that is how uninterrupted production is ensured. And beyond the company, some of these skills could be put into practice at micro level. An electrical technician can still work in small scale organisations as consultants or set up his own technical services. Indeed knowledge acquired from the training school is very relevant beyond Lafarge.

Lafarge's idea of empowerment echoed that of Unilever. One manager said:

> In Nigerian environment, Unilever is called a training school because of the high number of people that have passed through the company to allied companies. For example, I know of a man that worked here before and he had to leave; but I don't know the circumstance of his leaving the company. He started his own small manufacturing company and he produces some of our products for us on contract basis. For example, if we can't meet market demand, we contract him to supplement. Apart from that, the skills acquired in Unilever, can actually enable an individual to stand on his/her own and become an entrepreneur. The employees who work in the factory know the process of soap making and other allied products. They can work on their own and become small scale manufacturers.-

The discourse among the MNCs painted the picture of a sector that places a high premium on training and a skills development agenda that encouraged entrepreneurship and employment generation in Nigeria.

Skills for Employment and Job Mobility (Portability of Skills)

The global economic climate has made it expedient for skills to be mobile and amenable to different productive activities (Simatele 2015). This is an important human capital formation discourse and it aligns with the orientation of the MNC sector as revealed by different managerial officials of the companies selected for this study. The MNCs claim that their training and skills development programmes facilitated job mobility. A manager with Lafarge Cement Wapco said:

> We are in a dynamic world and you cannot tie people down from moving, especially to where they feel they will have fulfilment. It is healthy within the economy. It's really normal that we still maintain a healthy attrition rate. What we have going for us is the fact that we are a multinational, we are really not competing that much, others rather look for trained employees from us. Some of our staff do go to Cadbury; they are going to Nestlé. We have people going to Chevron, we have people going to Shell, and we are also taking people relevant to us from other places as well.

Another view was expressed by a manager at Unilever Nigeria Plc:

> Unilever has a long history of success in Nigeria. So many new companies in the home care sector have employees who have worked here. In fact, they know that these employees are competent with the work. Hardly will you find an employee of Unilever who is not doing something outside. In the Nigerian home care product environment, Unilever is actually called a training school.

The views obtained from the multinational corporate sector organisations showed that their skills programmes were amenable and applicable to other sectors. Some of the employees moved from one job to another easily, especially within the telecommunications sector.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this article reveal that the Nigerian government views MNCs as a veritable avenue for acquisition of high level skills and technical know-how. With the acquisition of high-level skills by Nigerians through working with multinationals, the country will be on a pathway towards sustainable industrial productivity. In addition, the high-level skills will generate economic spinoffs – the highly trained could set up industrial enterprises, become entrepreneurs and employers of labour for the teeming youth. Achieving all this will reduce skills inequality between expatriate and local employees and position the country on the much-desired development pathway.

However, the article revealed that within the MNC sector, there is distinction between '*high-level* skills' and '*strategic* skills'. While corporate skills development policies of the MNC sector supports the 'transfer' of *high-level* skills to locals, these are not necessarily the skills that sustain the companies' competitive advantage (cf. Bakan's (2004) 'profit pathology'). The companies place a special value on *strategic skills.* There seemed to be a deliberate reluctance to 'transfer' those skills that may well be deemed *strategic.* The companies maintain mechanisms for ensuring that *strategic* skills remain closely guarded, even kept outside the host country. For instance, Lafarge coaches operated like a 'standby force' deployed for a maximum period of six months for technical emergencies in the areas of operations from the company's headquarters. In addition, the idea of contracting highly skilled former employees of Unilever to supplement production for the company is another subtle way of censoring the skills and expertise of such experienced former employees from being diffused beyond Unilever control. Such company policy ensures that these productive technical skills are protected and kept under control.

While both the state and MNCs agree on the need to use MNCs to drive industrial development through training and development of high level skills in order to reduce inequality, the state may have missed out on a crucial nuance in that the high level skills being developed are not the strategic or critical skills that sustain these companies over the years. They develop high level skills but shield the critical or strategic skills from locals by policy design. While operations of Lafarge are in over a hundred countries, strategic skills of the coaches could be required from headquarters in Paris and the technical centre in Cairo. The two centres coordinate the activities of the coaches who are embodiments of the company's strategic skills. It should be noted that it is not planned for these coaches to be domiciled in Nigeria as in other countries, despite long years of operations. This points to protectionism of critical skills from the developing host countries of MNCs.

Note

1. An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the 18th ISA World Congress of Sociology with the theme 'Facing an Unequal World: The Challenges for Global Sociology', Yokohama, Japan 13–19 July 2014. Appreciation to the University of Fort Hare, South Africa.

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