

SONA 2016: six key issues in education the president got completely wrong

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In accordance with Article 67 of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, the President, Mr. John Dramani Mahama, delivered to Parliament a message on the state of the nation on Thursday 25 February, 2016. Following the release of the President's State of the Nation Address, we have critically examined the paper and highlighted six major issues we think the President could potentially have been misinformed. In each case, we have quoted the President and juxtaposed that with a critical appraisal of available policy documents, the NDC 2012 manifesto, and empirical evidence, and drawn implications on policy and practice. We do not think this is exhaustive of all the issues inherent in the address, but we believe this could be a starting point to engaging in a critical discussion of the President's speech with the view of enriching the discourse on the state of Ghana's education.

Issue 1

“Ghana has been commended by the United Nations for meeting the target of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on achieving universal primary education with gender parity. Despite that achievement, there are still a significant number of school-age children that are not enrolled. These children are now being targeted under the Compulsory Basic Education (CBE) programme of the Ministry of Education. In the last year, a total of 54,800 out of school children in four regions have been enrolled into schools. These are 54,800 children who would not have received an education. These are 54,800 children whose lives will now have much different outcomes as a result of this programme” (SONA 2016, p 3).

At present, there is no such government programme known as Compulsory Basic Education (CBE) of the Ministry of Education. It would appear that the President was referring to the Complimentary Basic Education (CBE) programme, which seeks to provide learning opportunity to disadvantaged Out-Of-School-Children on how to read and write within a nine-month period so that they could enter primary school at class three or four. The CBE programme has since 1995 been a flagship programme of School for Life (SFL), a non-governmental organisation in the Northern Region. Having recognised its success, demonstrated by significant impacts at the individual, family, and community level, the government decided to replicate the programme nationwide through the Complementary Basic Education Policy with funding from the DFID over a 4-year period (2012-2016) at the cost of some GBP 18 million. One would have thought that the President would cease the occasion to commend SFL for the initiative rather than surreptitiously taking credit for its introduction, especially when SFL appears to hold copyright over some of the CBE teaching and learning materials.

Issue 2

“Secondary education was plagued with a number of challenges, notably lack of access, leading to a poor transition rate from JHS to SHS. We are vigorously confronting these challenges. Under our programme to establish 200 Senior High Schools, I can report that 123 are currently being constructed” (SONA 26, p. 4).

Firstly, the President was quite vague when he touched on progress being made to establish the promised 200 Community Day Senior High Schools. In a speech delivered in August 2015 at the Agbleza Festival in the Volta Region, the President indicated that work was ongoing on the 123 out of the 200 Senior High Schools. Six months later, he only repeats the same line without providing specific rates of completion and specific locations for these schools unlike his report for other sectors. This does not only leave room for his sincerity to the people to be questioned but also makes his address potentially unreliable. We do know of the availability of funding for only 23 SHS under the World Bank's \$156 million grant facility for the Secondary Education Improvement Programme, but cannot ascertain the source of funding for the remaining 100 SHS. That notwithstanding, we contend that the Government cannot meet its campaign promise of establishing 200 Community Day Senior High Schools before January, 2017. Given that a broken manifesto pledge massively undermines people's trust in a political party, we urge government to be transparent on the progress of work on the Community Day Senior High Schools.

Secondly, the President appears to narrowly conceptualise access to secondary education as mere provision of infrastructure, without taking account of the broader issues of policy imperatives. In the training colleges for instance, the repeal of the quota system policy extended access from 9,000 to 15,000 according to official figures, a demonstration of expanding access to education through removal of a draconian policy. Agreeably, existing secondary schools have a capacity to absorb only 60% of the students who qualify from Junior High Schools; therefore, expanding infrastructure could potentially increase access to secondary education. However, given that the pass rate of BECE is roughly around 60%, only this proportion of students can gain access into secondary education even if there are adequate facilities. That is, the present policy regime imposes barrier on 40% of JHS graduates to proceed to SHS. The government can expand access to secondary education, or increase the transition rate from JHS to SHS by scraping BECE, and establish a six-year continuous secondary education system. Although, transition to the secondary school should be automatic, students must write a lower secondary school examination to enable schools place them into different upper secondary school programmes (e.g., academic or technical) at either the same institution, or they may transfer to another institution of their choice. The implication is that, we must redefine basic education to include secondary education in order for us to remain relevant to the present highly competitive global economy.

Issue 3

“In our determination to improve quality education, we have also introduced two new programmes - the Teacher Professional Development Initiative and the Provision of Teaching and Learning Materials programme. The Teacher Professional Development initiative aims to

achieve a target of 95% trained teachers at the basic level by 2020 as set out in the Education Strategic Plan (ESP)” (SONA 2016, p5).

The ESP stipulates a target of achieving 95% trained teacher by 2015 as illustrated in page 7 of the document. At the end of the 2015 academic year, the government had missed this target and it would appear that the President wanted to extend the timeline to five more years, or he, probably, might have been misinformed.

Issue 4

‘To fulfil the policy of providing Colleges of Education in under-served areas and to expand access to teacher training, Government is absorbing into the public stream the following colleges - Saint Ambrose College of Education, Dormaa District, Al-Farak College of Education, Wenchi District - this will become our first ever Islamic College of Education, Gambaga College of Education, East Mamprusi District, St. Vincent College of Education, Yendi Municipality, Bia Lamplighter College of Education, Bia District” (SONA 2016, p.3).

At Present, training of teachers in the 38 public Colleges of Education (CoEs) has been tied to the GBP 17 million DFID funded project, dubbed Transforming Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL), at least until 2018. The President acknowledged this in the last paragraph of page 6 of his speech. Therefore, attempting to absorb 5 private CoEs into the public stream has wide implications for the T-TEL project especially in relation to funding for the additional COEs, a position the project's quarterly report of August 2015 tends to support. Regrettably, the 2016 budget highlights this policy but appears to ignore the funding issue, casting doubt on the government's intentions.

Issues 5

It should be recalled that the government had in its 2012 Manifesto a promise of establishing “at least 10 new Colleges of Education in the medium term to be located in areas not well served currently in anticipation of the increase in student numbers on account of our increased access to education programme” (2012 NDC Manifesto, p.19). During the last budget statement to Parliament, the Finance Minister stated that “as part of the pledge to establish 10 new Colleges of Education in areas that are not well served, government absorbed five existing private” (p.127, para 671), a quotation repeated in the President's speech (p.6, para 3). The question is; how does the absorption of existing private CoEs becomes part of an agenda to establish new Colleges?

Issues 6

Beyond absorbing the five CoEs, the President and his Finance Minister appear uncertain of the number of new CoEs to be constructed in 2016, and have contradicted themselves. Whilst the Finance Minister mentioned that the government in 2016 will “commence the construction of two new Colleges of Education in the Central and the Greater Accra Regions to improve access” (p.127, para 671), the President also said in his speech that “work will begin on three new Colleges in the Greater Accra, Central and Northern Regions” (SONA 2016, p.6). There is every reason to believe that the government will miss its election promise of constructing 10 new colleges of education.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated several inconsistencies, misinformation and lack of sincerity in many areas of the President's speech specific to the education sector and urge the government to exercise circumspection and transparency in reporting such matters to the people.

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