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## **RETHINKING THE FOUNDATION OF THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Introduction: Conceptual background**

The theme of this conference, "Rethinking the foundation of the Nigerian Education system for Sustainable development" is quite timely and auspicious considering its social relevance, and academic significance within the context of current local and global economic political and educational exigencies. The potential of education as a potent tool for positive social transformation and sustainable economic and political development has since been acknowledged within and across nations. The United Nations gave credence and fillip to this in her defunct "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs) and her current "Sustainable Development Goals" (SDGs).

However, education is a complex, intriguing phenomenon, a bewildering paradox. It is both a cause and a consequence of development. It is at once an input element, a process component and output index in social engineering and nation-building, while it is also a social system with its own complex hierarchical and interlocking social relations and roles among differential categories and cadres of stake-holders all working towards a predetermined vision.

This implies that any meaningful form or system of education must have a pre-conceived purpose closely connected with its social economic and political context which must inform its firm foundations. A functional education system with a solid foundation firmly rooted within its cultural context is therefore a desideratum for sustainable development. Education thus possess the inherent capacity to positively transform society, but this intrinsic potential cannot be actualised without the right support from the underlying political, economic and their cultural institutions.

Therein lies the intriguing paradox: education is a tool for social, political, economic and cultural modernisation and progress, but education, in turn depends on these same background systems for its strength and survival. (Lawal, 2000) the paradox is analogous to the dialectical egg-cock relationship: which one comes first, is it the cock or the egg? The cock begets the egg which in turn produces the cock! The complex framework of "Sustainable Development Goals" is thus closely intertwined with quality

education as input, throughput and output in social, economic and political engineering and re-engineering.

The framework assumes that, given the right context and conditions, every nation can attain a considerable modicum of development which can be sustained and improved upon incrementally and progressively through the instrumentality of quality education, among other fundamental social institutions and systems. The concept of sustainable development appeared first at the close of the last millennium in response to the negative environmental consequences of economic growth and globalisation and the imperative for solution to the problems of industrialisation and population growth.

Coming on the heels of its precursor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is the nucleus of a new sustainable development roadmap, encapsulated within the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, which recollects the past global milestones, reflects on their connections with the present challenges and project into a future that can guarantee global well-being for humanity. This is the essence of thinking and rethinking in strategic social engineering. The idea of re-thinking presupposes an extant capacity for thinking and making rational decisions and choices. Thinking is quintessential to human nature: we are human beings because we are thinking beings. The French philosopher, Rene Descartes draws our attention to this unique human attribute in his much-cited "Cogito, ergo sum", usually translated into French as "Je pense, donc je suis" and into English as "I think, therefore I am"

Descartes argued that our capacity to think is the "source" of our humanity as there must, first and foremost, be a thinking entity. Again, which one comes first, the thinker or the thinking? As pointed out by Pierre Gassendi in his critique of the Cartesian dictum, the statement presupposes that there is an "I", first and foremost, which must be doing the thinking. (Monte, 2015), thus deconstructing the cause-consequence fallacy in the original proposition.

Nevertheless, thinking has since been acknowledged as a critical foundation for knowledge acquisition, for all knowledge-based activities and goal-oriented endeavours, including strategic management and social engineering, as indicated in Figure 1

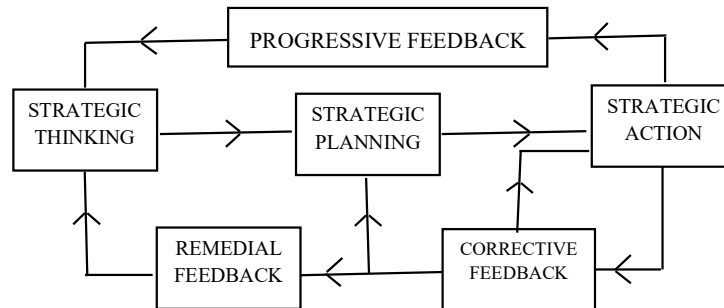


Figure 1: A Model of Thinking, Action and Feedback as Key Components of Strategic Management and Social Engineering (Adapted from Lawal, 2020)

The model in Figure 1 acknowledges the core components of strategic management and social engineering as Strategic Thinking, i.e. the foundation, followed by Strategic Planning and Strategic Action with necessary feedback in the three possible forms of Progressive Feedback (for successful implementation as planned), Corrective Feedback (for successful implementation but with minor deficits) and Remedial Feedback (for outright unsuccessful implementation) requiring total re-engineering, involving re-thinking, re-planning, new action and inbuilt continuous evaluation.

Therefore, as suggested in the theme of this conference, “re-thinking” implies the imperative of corrective feedback, if the Nigerian education system must be on strategic course as envisioned, planned and implemented, or, conversely, the system may require urgent remedial intervention, if bedevilled with fundamental systemic deficiencies and drawbacks.

#### **Key distinctive features of the Nigerian education system**

As previously indicated, every home-grown, socially relevant and purpose-driven system of education must be anchored firmly within the social, historical, political, economic and cultural peculiarities of its milieu. It must be undergirded by an explicit ideology of development based on the nation’s past experiences, contemporary realities and future aspirations. Such a crucial philosophy or vision of the society is usually articulated in the Constitution and reflected in the education policy in such an explicit and soul-stirring fashion as to secure the consensus and commitment of a wide spectrum of the citizenry. The key historical antecedents to the current education system in post-independence Nigeria are highlighted in the following paragraphs:

- The civil war between 1966 and 1970.
- The curriculum conference of 1969.
- The 1970-1974 Development plan.
- The UPE scheme launched in 1976.
- The birth of the first indigenous National Policy on Education in 1977, later reviewed in 1981, 1988, 2004, 2007 and 2013 with a reprint in 2014.
- The number of federal universities rose sharply from six (6) in 1970 to twenty-two (22) in 1990.

The 1979 constitution put higher education on the concurrent list, leading to the establishment of at least eight (8) state universities between 1980 and 1990, namely:

- i. Anambra State University of Technology, Enugu
- ii. River State University of Science and Technology
- iii. Ogun State University, Ago Iwoye
- iv. Lagos State University
- v. Bendel State University Ekpoma
- vi. University of Cross River State, Uyo
- vii. Imo State University, Okigwe
- viii. Ondo State University, Ado-Ekiti

With the creation of nine new states in 1991, the following universities were established:

- i. Abia State University, Uturu
- ii. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
- iii. Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho

From 1991 to 2021, a period of three decades, the growth of universities has been phenomenal, with 51 federal, 60 state and 111 private universities, making a total of 222 universities. If we add the 37 newly licensed private universities just last week, the total is now 257, with private ones jumping to 97. The growth of polytechnics, monotechnics, colleges of education and other tertiary educational institutions has been equally exponential, with the total numbers of polytechnics and colleges of education today being 164 and 163 respectively.

The privatisation trends discernible in the growth of university of education is also evident in the polytechnics and colleges of Education. Today there exist 76 accredited private, 51 state and 37 federal polytechnics, while the 163 accredited colleges of Education are made up of 82 private-owned, 51 state government-owned and 37 federal government-owned colleges. Today the picture emerging is the gradual outnumbering of public educational institutions by private ones at all the major rungs of the educational ladder, including the primary and secondary school levels.

The 1999 Constitution inherited the philosophical spirit of the 1979 Constitution as encapsulated in the following goals of developing Nigeria into:

- i. A united strong and self-reliant nation;
- ii. A great and dynamic economy;
- iii. A just and egalitarian society;
- iv. A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens; and
- v. A free and democratic society (FGN, 1999)

These goals constitute the socio-political vision of Nigeria as an aspiring democracy of the pseudo-liberalist and pseudo-capitalist brand, given the rent-seeking and exocentric nature of the economy (Aturu, 2011; Lawal, 2004). In consonance with the constitutional spirit, the National Policy on Education (2004) stipulates free, compulsory and universal primary education, free secondary and university education, and free adult literacy programme "AS AND WHEN PRACTICABLE" (emphasis mine).

The 1999 Constitution also stipulates the basic legal framework for all the three tiers of government - Federal, State and Local - to participate collaboratively and complementarily in the provision and management of education (Second schedule, Part II, paragraphs 27 to 30). In principle, the mainstream educational ladder has changed twice, first from the initial 7-5-2-3 scheme, through the 6-3-3-4 structure, to the current nebulous 9-3-4 hierarchy.

The foregoing highlights describe the historical, philosophical, economic and political foundations of the Nigerian education system. Can these crucial fundamentals assist the nation attain an appreciable level of development that can be sustained via quality education and a modern, knowledge-driven economy?

#### **Development as creation of sustainable wealth**

A critical assessment of the United Nations' 17 SDGs would reveal the critical role of education in achieving them, apart from quality education itself being one of the targets.

This indicates that education is an instrumental, multiplier goal that cuts across all the other targets, as previously explained. The SDGs include:

- 1.No poverty
- 2.Zero Hunger
- 3.Good Health and well-being
- 4.Quality Education
- 5.Gender Equality
- 6.Clean Water and Sanitation
- 7.Affordable and Clean Energy
- 8.Decent Work and Economic Growth
- 9.Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
10. Reduced Inequalities
11. Sustainable Cities
12. Responsible Consumption and Production
13. Climate Action
14. Life Below Water
15. Life on Land
16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institution
17. Partnerships for the Goals

A critical, reconstructive appraisal of these 17 inter-connected goals would yield an underlying model of wealth / capital creation and development as schematically captured in Figures 2 and 3

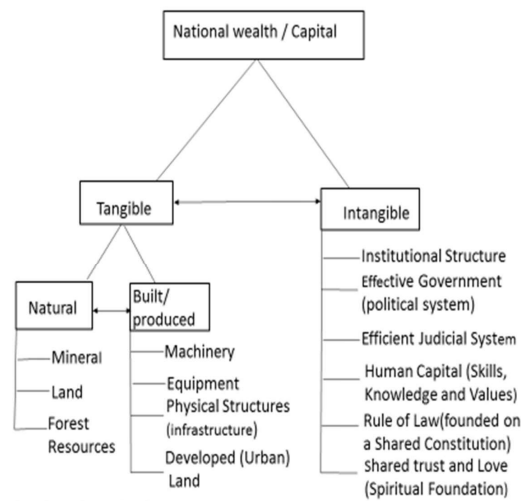


Figure 2: Anatomy of National Wealth and Development

Based on Figure 2, intangible capital is more critical and consequential for development than tangible capital as the role of law and the allied values and institutions supporting economic activities are stronger indices of national wealth and development. Next to the rule of law is quality education and then the effectiveness of government in that order of significance. Inept governance leads to low intangible capital or what can be termed as intangible capital deficit which may manifest in different forms of corruption, it is thus possible to conceptualize the architecture of national wealth and development as presented in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Architecture of National Wealth and Development

The hierarchy in Figure 3 acknowledges the components of intangible capital, i.e. shared trust and love, rule of law, effective governance and efficient institutions, including the education system, as the mainspring of development, since national resources and built infrastructure maybe short-lived, especially if strong values and institutions do not support and sustain them. The model also affirms the foundational role of education in the attainment of tangible wealth and development, but the education system is also a function of the background “spiritual” foundation of shared love and trust and the other fundamentals of the rule of law and the quality of governance. The model also affirms that nationalism (authenticity as a united people) is a necessary but not sufficient condition for nationism, which is the operational efficiency that characterizes the developed nation-states of the world.

This crucial question at this juncture pertains to whether the foundational framework earlier highlighted for the Nigerian educational system can bring about quality education which, in turn, would be instrumental to the attainment and sustenance of the 16 other SDGs.

### Foundational challenges in the Nigerian educational system

Cybernetics is a science of systems which can be employed to gain a deep understanding of organisms, mechanisms and other such complex social systems as education. There are four main approaches to systemic challenges, namely 'absolution', 'resolution', 'solution' and 'dissolution', all of which are applicable to the different aspects of the Nigerian educational systemic problem, depending on the nature of the challenges.

**Absolution:** is the escapist, fatalistic and laissez-faire approach. In this approach, prayers are the 'first resort' and such escapist suggestions as 'we are all guilty' and 'God will take charge' are very common.

**Resolution:** is the trial and error, here-and-now approach which employs short-term commonsensical strategies based on the qualitative methods because this approach makes everyone happy and the system does not grind to a halt. The danger in this approach is the illusion of progress, as there is plenty of movement without motion.

**Solution:** employs strategies that yield the best outcome, i.e. quantitative, evidence-based techniques that optimise results which may, however, entail restructuring of key elements and processes in the system.

**Dissolution:** involves outright re-designing, which, as indicated in Figure 1, implies 're-thinking' and, concomitantly, re-planning and re-implementation. This is not to suggest that thinking does not undergird the processes of planning and implementation of reform and restructuring agenda. However, thinking and re-thinking are most profound and tasking in the case of designing an ailing and failing system. We can now explore the implications and applications of the foregoing conceptual models and analyses to rethink the unproductive and counter-productive aspects of the foundation of the Nigerian education system.

**The Spiritual Foundation of Nationalism:** This is the most basic fundament of nationalism as manifested through shared trust and love, and through the foundation of a shared Constitution, which in turn must be the bedrock of the National Policy on Education. Although both the Nigerian Constitution and the education policy target the national goals of building a strong and self-reliant nation, a great and dynamic economy, a just and egalitarian society, a land of bright and full opportunities for all and a free and democratic society, these goals, laudable as they appear, are not anchored on any concrete ideology of development that can unify them, nor does the Constitution specify a clear roadmap to attaining them.

This may explain why the American democratic model was imported wholesale without due consideration for Nigeria's historical, socio-cultural and economic peculiarities. The national goals thus remain in the realm of high-sounding ideals that have not been properly domesticated to suit the Nigerian unique situation and produce a set of values that can serve as a rallying vision for mobilising the populace for the task of nation-building. The national goals would therefore need to be re-articulated ('re-designed'?) to reflect a particular ideology of development with its component core values with which the citizenry can easily connect and which can serve the much-needed purpose of popular mobilisation. As opposed to the current tacit affirmation of the dependency model of development, the Constitution must be reconstructed (or 're-designed'?) to align with the

modernisation model of nation-building through the indispensable instrumentality of education.

**The Foundation of the Rule of Law:** The Constitution stipulates a federal political structure in which primary or basic education is expected to be under the complete jurisdiction of the Local Government. In reality, however, the polity operates largely as a unitary political system in which the financial and administrative control of primary education resides with the federal and state governments, in a top-bottom rather than bottom-up development model for the education system. This counter-productive situation has to be reversed (or ‘restructured’?) in the spirit of a truly federal Constitution and in the interest of the all-important basic education in Nigeria.

**The Foundation of Educational Vision:** The nebulous socio-political philosophy in the Constitution has, understandably, a negative backwash effect on the education system, beginning with the all-important vision for education across all the rungs of the ladder. Neither the Constitution nor the National Policy on Education has articulated a clear, well-thought-out and inspiring vision and purpose for the Nigerian education system, with concise and precise values which all stakeholders can identify with.

For instance, in transforming Malaysia from a poor country into a developed nation-state within a relatively short period (1959-1990), Lee Kuan Yew leveraged on the modernisation model of development hinged on the key governance principles of ‘civic nationalism’, ‘meritocracy’ and ‘multiracialism’ to articulate the Malaysian educational vision as the cultivation of ‘thinking hands,’ thus creatively connecting functional knowledge and skills with positive values in the revolutionary drive for technological advancement. Nigeria can definitely learn from the positive propaganda value of this simple but profound mantra and its component core values of ‘merit’, ‘pragmatism’ and ‘integrity’ by rethinking her own educational philosophy in tandem with the modernisation model of development.

**The Foundation of Professed Populism Vis-à-vis Gradual but Steady Privatisation of Education:** As inferred previously from the demographics of universities, polytechnics and colleges of education in Nigeria, the tacit policy direction is towards gradual but steady privatisation of education at the tertiary level. This insidious trend is also true of the primary and secondary levels in most states of the federation, including the Federal Capital Territory. This is in sharp contradiction to the spirit, half-hearted though, in both the Constitution and the National Policy on Education (NPE) which both promise:

- a. free, compulsory and universal primary education;
- b. free secondary education;
- c. free university education; and
- d. free adult literacy programme. (FRN, 1999; 2014)

Apart from the omission of the college of education and the polytechnic from this ‘free education’ largesse, the stipulation that ‘Government shall as and when practicable provide’ this, is an escapist clause reminiscent of the laissez-faire, absolutionist approach towards systemic malfunction. Such clauses would have to be expunged from both documents and a strategic time-line developed for whatever is practicable within a marshal-plan period. Otherwise, the logical result will continue to be crisis in educational



practice as evidenced by the mushroom growth of sub-standard institutions at all levels of the educational system due to the weak regulatory mechanisms.

All human systems, including education, are far from being perfect and, as such, are bound to experience evolutionary challenges from time to time. As indicated earlier on, cybernetics has offered us three broad strategic approaches in dealing with systemic problems, depending on their nature and magnitude as well as the goals of the system's operators. The need to properly align antidotes with ailments is well acknowledged in many traditional African societies. In Yoruba proverbial wisdom, for instance, 'beheading is not the cure for migraine' and 'we cannot cure leprosy with the medication meant for ringworm'. However, unfortunately, the various reform agendas in Nigeria have failed to benefit from the right quality and quantity of strategic intervention as evident in the following ill-informed features which Obanya (2008) has broadly categorised into faulty conceptualisation (i.e. faulty thinking) and faulty methodology (i.e. planning and implementation).

#### **Faulty conceptualisation**

Non-global, non-systemic conception of education: This often leads to 'loading in new ideas, particularly curriculum loading, as fancy dictates' (Obanya, 2008:25). Without a deep, holistic appraisal of the educational challenge, the school system is scandalised for problems rooted in other underlying support institutions and systems in the society. This non-systemic but linear conception fails to appreciate the inter-connection among educational inputs, processes and products, but promotes, instead, disjointed incrementalism and patchy alterations in policy rethinking

A case in point is the new Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) in the Nigerian university system which has received negative appraisal from experienced intellectuals in different universities across various academic fields and disciplines. In the teacher education programmes, for instance, the CCMAS has failed to reflect reliable empirical findings on what constitutes 'the ideal teacher identity' (Yusuf, 2012; Mumini, 2015; Yusuf, 2017). Hence, the autonomous and highly significant historical, philosophical, sociological, psychological, and pedagogical foundations of education have been grossly weakened and merged into a one-shot 2-credit course (EDU 101), just to cite an example. As it were, the foundations overnight have suddenly become mere accessories, a situation analogous to robbing the Peter of education to pay the Paul of the teaching subject, instead of judiciously balancing the equal demands of both, as informed by research-based evidence indicating that the ideal teacher is a master of both content and methodology (Yusuf, 2012).

**Doing the wrong things for the wrong reasons:** As aptly noted by Obanya (2008), this is faulty reasoning founded on unsound educational theory and socially unsound logic. An example is the suggestion implied in the 6-3-3-4 educational ladder that vocational education should be for students incapable of benefitting from 'academic education'. The incorrectness of this assumption can be gleaned from the Malaysian dictum of 'Thinking Hands', implying that using the hands creatively requires adequate control of the brain. Indeed, creative use of the hands should be an integral part of basic education for all calibres of learners, including the 'brilliant' ones.

**Old Wines in New Bottles:** Here rethinking does not go beyond merely changing labels as the structures and processes remain unchanged. The ‘new’ 9-3-4 education system, as an illustration, is still the same as the old 6-3-3-4 system as the junior secondary school is yet to be fully disarticulated from the senior level and both still co-exist within the same secondary school premises, without promoting the original spirit of the 6-3-3-4 structure.

**Contradiction in Lieu of Consolidation:** Many of the problems bedeviling the education system are products of contradictions built into it. The NPE, for instance, stipulates one of the national aims of education as the attainment of an egalitarian society. However, there are hundreds of expensive and exclusive institutions at all levels. The elitist, private-owned pre-primary and primary schools also employ English as medium of instruction in clear violation of the NPE’s provision on the use of the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment in the first three years of primary education (Lawal, 2008).

**Discontinuity Syndrome:** This deep-rooted syndrome manifests in disjointed incrementalism in reforms. As governments come and go, and Ministers/Commissioners of Education come and go, cosmetic pet programmes (rather than constructive reforming, restructuring or re-designing as may be appropriate) are super-imposed on the NPE and the overall goals, strengths and lapses in the policy become blurred. For instance, it took more than two decades after launching the UPE scheme by Obasanjo as a military Head of State for the same Obasanjo as a civilian President to revisit and restructure it into UBE. The four or five intervening governments simply abandoned it and embarked on their own respective ‘reforms’ (Lawal, 2008).

**Policy devoid of Planning:** A recurrent methodological drawback in the management of the education system in Nigeria is poor planning, apart from weak implementation, evaluation and feedback processes. Considering the complex and comprehensive scope and goals of the UBE project, for instance, it ought to have been subjected to painstaking planning involving needs assessment and a reliable pilot-test, leveraging on the previous UPE experience. This would have pre-empted and prevented the controversy among the Local, State and Federal Governments on the legal jurisdiction over certain aspects of the scheme, among several other recurrent challenges (Lawal, 2008).

**Hop-Step-but-no-Jump:** As noted by Obanya (2008), this occurs when the political class, deeply engrossed in shadow-boxing, keeps raising public expectations without the political will and integrity to do the needful. This is the bane of the ‘free education’ clause in both the Constitution and the NPE, apart from the classic example of the perennial lip service successive governments’ pay to the plight of the millions of out-of-school children. The crucial question at this juncture is: if the Constitution stipulates, as it does, that primary education is compulsory, why has it failed to prescribe appropriate sanction against parents of children who roam the streets of our cities, towns and villages during school hours?

**Excessive Control in the Face of Laxity:** The paradox of excessive control co-existing with laxity has been a characteristic of the Nigerian education system. Laxity is obvious in the mushroom proliferation of institutions at all levels of the educational ladder without the right magnitude and quality of supervision from the regulatory agencies. Perhaps, no other policy initiative exemplifies excessive control better than the IPPIS which has strangled

staff recruitment and discipline as well as programme development in the federal universities, polytechnics, monotechnics and colleges of education.

**Fire-Brigade Techniques:** The natural consequence of all the conceptual and methodological lapses just highlighted is failure, plagued with crisis and confusion, but the panacea is to plan painstakingly, implement conscientiously and evaluate consistently with a view to constantly providing both corrective and reconstructive feedback into the ailing system.

However, what is common in Nigeria is the penchant for ceremonial launching and other forms of window-dressing devoid of sober and reflective drawing-board thinking and re-thinking. This would explain why the second-official-language status for French was imposed arbitrarily on the NPE without any due consideration for the sociolinguistic implications and its bearing on the other language policy aspects in the document. In the same vein, the two UBE provisions (15 and 16) were retroactively inserted into the 2004 version of the policy in a rather casual and perfunctory manner, several years after the scheme had been launched ceremoniously in 1999. Apart from being another illustration of policy making before or without adequate planning, it also exemplifies what Obanya (2008) identifies as the predilection for ‘adding on and on’, without consideration for structural balance, harmony and constructive alignment in re-inventing the system.

#### **Concluding remarks: The way forward**

Education is a complex social institution and a multidimensional system, which depends heavily on the equally complex foundations of the background social, legal, political and economic systems to derive its ethos and structure. These undergirding systems include, first and foremost, what has been construed as the spiritual foundation of shared love and mutual trust among the populace without which the necessary fundament of nationalism becomes weak and shaky.

Next is the constitutional framework which provides the ideological and legal foundation for the collective vision and aspirations of the people. It also provides the philosophical and legal bedrock for the National Policy on Education, which in turn stipulates the national educational vision and how the various strategies, activities and institutions within the education system would work harmoniously to achieve national targets within specified timelines, using critical assessment and feedback strategies. We have examined the weaknesses and lapses in these foundations in terms of the conceptual and methodological ailments that have plagued visioning, planning, implementation and feedback initiatives in the Nigerian education system in the post-independence era.

Deriving critical insights from cybernetics, the science of systems, and leveraging on the imperatives of strategic thinking, strategic planning and strategic action, rethinking the foundation of the system would essentially involve judicious and harmonious blend of strategic “solution” and “dissolution” in restructuring and re-designing, respectively, aspects of the system and its foundational institutions, depending on the quality, magnitude and context of the ailments identified, while reforming the ill-informed conception, process and practice of reforming itself.

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