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Adult education in Nigeria: The consequence of neglect and agenda for action

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In spite of the rich variety of natural resources in Nigeria, the country is still very much underdeveloped. Within and outside Nigeria, analysts are of the view that the country clearly has the potential to be prosperous. As Nigeria attempts without much success to pull itself out of the quagmire of underdevelopment, the inevitably persistent question has been: given the resources at its disposal, why has the country remained mired in poverty? This paper attempts to provide a partial answer by arguing that Nigeria's inadequate commitment, over the years, to pursue the development of adult education as a strategic objective, as well as an instrument for national development has been one of the major drawbacks to the country's efforts to pull itself out of poverty. Underscoring the role of education in contemporary society, the paper proposes an adult education agenda for Nigeria.

Adult education, adult learning, development education,
Nigerian education, entrepreneurship education

INTRODUCTION

With a population of about 120 million, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the largest unit of people of African origin in the world. The country is endowed with a variety of natural resources. Nigeria is a member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and a leading producer of palm oil, cocoa, and rubber. Ironically, poverty continues to ravage the potentially wealthy country. Nigeria is ranked 151st of 177 nations in the 2004 Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2004a). Between 66 to 70 per cent of Nigerians are poor, and the rate of unemployment is about 15% (United Nations Development Programme, 2004b).

This paper argues that the pervasive poverty in Nigeria partly derives from sustained inadequate commitment to the development of adult education. The paper first engages in a historical review of inadequate attention to adult education in Nigeria, highlighting in the process, missed opportunities to develop adult education significantly and to utilise it as a veritable tool for national development. It then briefly discusses education in contemporary society, underscoring its economic, social, political and cultural value. Finally, the paper proposes an adult education agenda for Nigeria. Adult education, for this paper, "encompasses all education and training activities undertaken by adults for professional or personal reasons. It includes general, vocational and enterprise based training within a lifelong perspective" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003, p. 4).

HISTORICAL REVIEW OF NEGLECT

Nigeria was colonised by Britain. The British government had no clearly defined policy on education for Nigeria before 1925. Education activities in the colony were managed by colonial

administrators, in consultation with Christian missions and their home offices. (Fafunwa, 1974). In 1922, a commission set up by the Phelps-Stokes Fund to look into education in West and Equatorial Africa, which included Nigeria, produced a report titled: *Education in Africa*. The report emphasised the need for a policy on adult and community education (Fafunwa, 1974). The commission's recommendation for the development and institution of a policy on adult education represented the first key formal acknowledgement of the need to develop adult education alongside youth education or schooling. The commission stressed the education of the entire community if education was to result in meaningful development. To educate the children at school while the adult population remained largely illiterate and uneducated amounted to a grossly inadequate utilisation of education in development.

Following the Phelps-Stokes report, the British colonial government issued its first education policy for Nigeria in 1925. The policy and its implementation strategies did not address, in any significant way, community or adult education. Rather, the colonial government concentrated on school education. Consequently, a significant opportunity to begin to develop adult education in Nigeria was missed.

However, in 1951, the Central Board of Education endorsed a policy on adult education. The aim of adult education, as articulated in the policy, was to organise remedial primary education for adults. This included basic adult literacy and craft-making. The policy stressed the importance of women's participation in adult education (Fafunwa, 1974). Following the policy, adult literacy classes sprung up in many parts of Nigeria. There was considerable enthusiasm for adult literacy among the people and the governments of the three regions of Nigeria: East, West, and North. The enthusiasm was particularly strong from 1950 to 1956, but the free primary education schemes initiated from 1955 and 1957 resulted in the waning of the enthusiasm and in drastic decline in government support for adult literacy. The enormous cost of free primary education left little resources for adult literacy. Thus, the first somewhat serious attempt at adult education lost steam or even collapsed.

In 1959, the Ashby Commission was appointed to determine Nigeria's human resources needs, as well as the country's needs for post-secondary education over the next twenty years, 1960-1980. Reviewing Nigeria's primary, secondary and post-secondary education, the commission noted that the country had made progress in these levels and recommended further expansion. The commission was, however, curiously, silent on adult education. Consequently, very little attention was paid to its development. Nevertheless, adult education flickered in some communities unattended to by the federal government. It was barely kept alive by regional governments and voluntary agencies.

Nigeria became independent in 1960. Since then, there have been several National Development Plans articulating the country's development priorities and strategies. None of the plans provided a comprehensive framework and impetus for the development of adult education. The Nigerian National Policy on Education was adopted in 1977 and modified in 1981. The policy provides for equal access to education, including continuing and further education, and commits to the eradication of illiteracy and promotion of lifelong learning. Beyond the articulation of desired outcomes, nothing much has been achieved in terms of significant development of adult education. For instance, 28 years after the adoption of the policy, the literacy rate for Nigerians 15 years and older is about 66% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2004). There has hardly been a sustainable, virile, and coherently comprehensive set of programs demonstrating government's commitment to adult education as a strategic priority in Nigeria's development.

Although the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education was established in 1990 to monitor and coordinate adult education programs, as well as to conduct research related to the development of adult and non-formal education in the country, adult

education programs continue to operate mainly as disparate, piecemeal activities that are not integrated into a coherent, purposeful strategy in pursuit of a national development vision. Many government sponsored adult education activities have been chronically anemic due to inadequate funding, and lackadaisically implemented owing largely to a historical lack of passion and vision for adult education as both a strategic goal and an instrument for national development. Adult education curricula are hardly forward-looking or responsive to the strategic needs of the economy or to the personal, social and political development needs of the vast majority of Nigerian adults. Frameworks for organising and delivering programs are hardly innovative or forward-looking. The lack or inadequacy of physical and instructional facilities in government-owned adult education training centres is indicative of the neglect and marginal status of adult education (Aderinoye, 2002).

Inadequate commitment to the development of adult education is not unique to Nigeria; it is a typical phenomenon in most African countries. A number of factors account for the underdevelopment of adult education and education generally in Africa (Omolewa, 2000; World Bank, 2001). They include "the constraints of funding, lack of continuity of policy, increasing huge debt, problem of gender and language" (Omolewa, 2000, p. 15).

EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

There is hardly any industrialised country without a well-developed adult education and training system – a system that not only provides a rich variety of programs or courses that respond to both personal and national development needs, but also seeks to remove barriers to adult participation. The relatively routinely heavy investment industrialised countries make in adult education and training is informed by the critical role of knowledge and skills in modern economy. The economic productivity value of education generally is supported by human capital theory (Denison, 1962; Shultz, 1961). The theory considers human resources as a vital economic factor. It, therefore, espouses the pursuit of education for economic productivity. Education directly contributes to the growth of national economy by improving the skills and productive capacity of workers. Conversely, the theory postulates that a lack of education keeps individuals and nations poor. The implication of human capital theory for the individual in the context of a modern economy which emphasises knowledge, skills, and technology is that the acquisition and continual updating of knowledge and skills is imperative.

Closely related to the economic productivity rationale for education is the rationale of professionalisation of modern society (Cullen, 1978, Eraut, 1994). Professionalisation or occupational rationalisation (Cullen, 1978) is driven by a number of factors. The complexity of modern society calls for the services of a multiplicity of diverse occupations, which demands the preparation of large numbers of people for the different occupations. Besides, modern society needs knowledge-experts in diverse fields for knowledge generation. Systematic pursuit of knowledge about the physical and social world can best be handled by experts. Similarly, efficient and effective application of knowledge and skills to valued social purposes requires specialists. Thus, professionalisation, or the reality of 'expert society' makes the acquisition of 'expert knowledge and skills', obtainable from participation in education, a necessary requirement for entry into occupations or professions.

Countries also invest in education because education facilitates personal and social development. It is becoming increasingly limiting for anyone to function in modern society without a good measure of education. Even though Nigeria is not quite there yet, the imperatives of 'information and technology society' demand that individuals possess at least basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as, general social knowledge. The rapid obsolescence of knowledge and skills literally requires individuals who need up-to-date knowledge and skills for personal development and occupational purposes to participate continually in education or lifelong learning. Taking into

account the multiple social and economic roles of education in modern society, 'institutionalists' (Meyer, 1992), observe that contemporary society has institutionalised education as a citizenship right, as a social virtue, as a public good, and as a stratification process.

ADULT EDUCATION AGENDA

An adult education agenda for Nigeria would entail the development and implementation of a systemic adult education policy. The policy would be guided both in conception and implementation by a philosophy of continuing education or lifelong learning. Lifelong learning as a philosophy and a way of life emphasises that learning should be ongoing throughout life. A responsively comprehensive adult education policy should seek to institute and sustain a culture of learning that will lead to the emergence of a learning society (Edwards, 1997). As Nigerian adults grapple with the problems and opportunities in their personal lives, they are simultaneously challenged to contribute to the development of their communities and society. Hence, lifelong learning becomes imperative, not only for the effective functioning of individuals at the workplace and in their own communities, but also for the renewal of society itself. A systemic and comprehensive adult education policy would pursue, among others, the following key objectives.

Provision of incentives for adult participation

Adults are generally saddled with occupational and familial concerns. In a country like Nigeria, where poverty is currently pervasive, people are preoccupied with how to eke out a living. Consequently, motivating adults to participate in education and training programs that are not employer-sponsored would require a variety of incentives, such as subsidised child care services especially in the cities, flexible scheduling, and career and personal guidance services.

Coherence of programs

In most developing countries, adult education programs are not integrated to ensure a relationship among the programs, and to ensure that each program, at once, addresses the needs of adult participants, as well as the needs of society. Coherence would also seek to ensure that the programs or services prospective participants need are available, and that ways in which participants can transition among programs are provided. A coherent adult education policy would have a unifying mission, as well as organisational structural mechanisms for coordinating programs and activities. The policy would provide a clearly defined framework and guidelines for the participation of non-governmental organisations, the private sector and international organisations in adult education.

Comprehensiveness of offerings

There is a tendency in developing countries to concentrate efforts in adult education on literacy or basic education. If the talents and abilities of the adult population are to be developed, mobilised and optimally utilised in national development, there must be comprehensive education and training opportunities for adults. A variety of professional, vocational and general education programs and courses must be available and affordable. Listed and briefly discussed below are examples of broad themes or topics around which programs could be developed and offered not just in cities, but also in rural communities. Of course, many more themes could be added to the list; there is no intention here to be exhaustive.

Personal development and family management

Responsive adult education should aim at helping adults to make informed choices in managing their personal and familial concerns. Adult education for personal development would provide

learners guidance on how to access information regarding issues, such as health, nutrition, family planning, education and career opportunities for self and children.

Civic and peace education

Citizens need to understand how government functions, and what their responsibilities and rights are. They should know the procedures they can utilise to constrain or influence their leaders. Civic education programs would help to bring about a more politically aware citizenry. Gartforth (1980) stressed the need for an educated populace if democracy is to succeed: "without an educated electorate democracy is impossible, for it requires of its citizens alert, informed, critical interest and, as far as possible, participation in the processes of government" (p. 36). In Nigeria, national unity has been a challenge. The country is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and culturally diverse. Mutual suspicion and unhealthy rivalry among different ethnic groupings tend to constitute a draw-back to national unity or cohesion. Rivalry, suspicion, and violence among ethnic and religious groupings could be minimised through well-designed peace education programs institutionalised in communities across the country. It is believed that education can help to bring about a culture of peace. Acknowledging education as a means to a culture of peace, Ministers of Education, under the aegis of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), resolved in 1994 "to pay special attention to improving curriculum, the content of text books, and other educational materials including new technologies, with a view to educating caring and responsible citizens, open to other cultures, able to appreciate the value of freedom, respectful of human dignity and differences, and able to prevent conflicts or resolve them by non-violent means" (UNESCO, p. 2, 1994).

Community development education

Community development is another area adult education can play a key role in Nigeria. Given that about 64 per cent of Nigerians live in rural communities (United Nations Development Programme, 2004b), responsive adult education programming can be utilised to raise people's consciousness and make them aware of their circumstances and opportunities. Freire (1973) advocated a consciousness-raising process designed to help individuals to become aware of the fundamental problems in their lives to the extent that they are motivated to take action to improve their circumstances. Community development education programs could be developed around themes, such as leadership, stewardship and accountability, self-help, teamwork, basic economic and health issues, as well as social change process.

Entrepreneurship education

Viewed broadly, entrepreneurship education aims to equip learners with skills, knowledge and dispositions that can help them develop or implement innovative social or business plans. Gottleib and Ross (1997) view entrepreneurship education in terms of creativity and innovation applied to business, governmental and social, enterprises. Entrepreneurship education could help to reduce the high rate of unemployment in both urban and rural areas of Nigeria, by equipping adults with the knowledge and skills for setting up and running small businesses effectively. Entrepreneurship education, however, is not only about pursuing economic ends; it also helps learners to develop entrepreneurial or problem-solving skills they could use in addressing personal and social challenges. Entrepreneurship education that proactively prepares learners for an unpredictable world can not only help to overcome dependence and hopelessness but also stimulate the emergence of an enterprising culture that values creativity, flexibility, self-efficacy, self-employment and self-sufficiency.

Literacy

Nigeria cannot develop in any significant way if the majority of Nigerians are not first considerably developed. Literacy is critical to the development of individual Nigerians and the country. The Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life (ICPQL, 1996) graphically highlights the limitations of the illiterate. In contemporary society in which laws, rules and instructions are written, illiteracy is a "severe handicap when participating in decisions affecting life: it is tantamount to disability, affecting every aspect of living. It confines job opportunities to the most menial and low-paid tasks" (ICPQL, 1996, p. 174). For a significant number of citizens to be illiterate in multi-ethnic Nigeria is a national handicap. None of the three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) is the lingua franca, and the English language which the majority of the rural dwellers can either not speak or write well enough or cannot speak or write at all is the official language. Consequently, the participation of illiterate Nigerians in national discourse and in sundry social and economic transactions is hardly significant or meaningful.

Content and Pedagogy Quality

In keeping with the philosophy of lifelong learning, a responsive and systemic adult education policy would require continual review of both content and method of delivery of programs in order to ensure their currency, appropriateness and effectiveness. The relevance of content to both the needs of learners and of the economy or society should be a key factor in judging quality of content, especially in personal, social and occupational programs. Quality of pedagogy would be judged, among other things, by the extent, to which teaching methods adhere to the principles of andragogy (Knowles, 1984) and constructivism (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004). It is common in developing countries for adult education courses to be taught by teachers without adult education training. Such teachers tend to utilise conventional 'school-like' pedagogical approaches that are not quite appropriate for teaching adults. This can make participation in education unattractive to adults, especially those who may be suspicious of, or may have had unpleasant experiences with schooling.

Research and Evaluation

A purposeful and systemic adult education policy would need, for its continuing effectiveness and development, an ongoing and methodical process of gathering and analysing data about its operations. Research and evaluation would seek to answer questions like the following: To what extent are the various adult education programs meeting their stated goals? What is the impact of the programs on quality of life and the economy? What are the barriers to participation in each program? How effective and learner-friendly are the pedagogical and delivery methods? Is the adult education system diverse enough to address the various needs of the economy? How might the system and its programs be improved?

CONCLUSIONS

With enrolments of about 16,797,078 primary and 4,448,981 secondary students in 2001 (Dike, 2001) and university enrolments of 411,347 in 1998 (Jibril, 2003), Nigeria has made modest but significant progress in the development of formal and youth education. Nevertheless, a country that almost concentrates its educational investment on youth and formal education is unwittingly failing to develop and utilise its human resources optimally. Considering that knowledge and skills have become the means for individuals and nations to be competitive, the high rates of poverty and unemployment in Nigeria, in spite of the country's natural resources, can be attributed, to a significant extent, to the lack of an education and training system committed to equipping adults to contribute more effectively to social, economic, political and cultural

development. National development or competitiveness, no matter how passionately desired, is not likely to occur to any meaningful extent if a country is not earnestly committed to a sustainable and coherent adult education policy purposefully articulated with its development goals.

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