

REINVENTING LITERACY EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The power of literacy education lies not just in the ability to read and write, but rather in a person's capacity to apply these skills to effectively connect, interpret and discern the intricacies of the world in which he lives. Literacy education involves a continuum of learning to enable individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potentials, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. The goal of sustainable livelihood is to allow growth that benefits humanity. It is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This paper establishes the fact that the empowering potential of literacy education can translate to increasing the three integrated and indivisible dimensions of sustainable development: environmental, economic and social, in Nigeria. The paper therefore concludes that in order to achieve sustainable livelihood in the country, literacy education programmes should therefore, integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development in its programmes – Environmental empowerment, economic development and social equity.

Introduction

There is no gain saying the fact that people are the centre of sustainable development. However, sustainable development cannot be realized without educated people. Education has long been understood to be the key to sustainable development. Some of the identified unsustainable developmental challenges in our society, in the words of Bokova (2015), include inefficient use of energy, poverty, increased environmental pollution, abuse of human rights, unemployment, and social inequality and so on. Thus, society should not just focus only on formal education, but on such type of education in which the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of

people are empowered, through access to relevant knowledge and skills, education that will help to eradicate poverty and hunger and assist to address the challenges of supporting people in living healthy lives, promoting gender equity, and ensuring the availability of water and sanitation and access to decent employment and work, to mention just a few. The type of education refers to in this context is literacy education.

Literacy education is traditionally understood as the ability to read, write and do simple arithmetic. Recently, the meaning has been expanded to include the ability to use language, numbers, images, computers, and other basic means to understand, communicate, gain useful knowledge and

use the dominant symbol systems of a culture. The concept of literacy is further expanded by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries to include skills to access knowledge through technology and ability to assess complex contexts (OECD, 2013). According to Alfaliti (2014), once these skills are acquired, the reader can attain full language literacy, which includes the abilities to apply to printed material critical analysis; to write with accuracy and coherence; and to use information and insights from text as the basis for informed decisions and creative thought.

Sustainable development can be described in terms of ongoing, enhanced human well-being as well as continued national economic growth, and then it requires the full participation of the target community (James, Magee, Scerri & Steger, 2015). Sustainable development is generally thought to have three components: Environmental, economic and social. The well-being of these areas is intertwined, not separate. For instance, a healthy, prosperous society relies on a healthy environment to provide food and resources, safe drinking water, and clean air for the citizens. Therefore, people need basic knowledge from the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities to understand the principles of sustainable development, how they can be implemented, the values involved, and ramifications of their implementation.

Thus, literacy education for sustainable livelihood requires far-reaching changes in the way literacy education is often practiced today. It requires not only a better supply of learning opportunities to use, improve and retain literacy skills, but also, helps in reducing poverty; assisting

people who are vulnerable to health risk; enabling girls and women to reach their full potentials and assisting mothers to improve their children's nutrition; liberating people to understand, supporting and creating solutions that ensure the development of sustainable cities and communities, as well as using energy and water more efficiently and to recycle household waste (UNESCO, 2013).

Despite the benefits of literacy education to individuals in particular and the society at large, Aaron, (2015) stated that there has been barely any improvement in adult literacy rates since 2000; from 83% to an estimated 86% in 2015. Worldwide more than 750 million adults are unable to read and write. This is a severe handicap for living a fulfilled life, and this is what is being experienced by over half of all women in sub-Saharan Africa and south and west Asia.

• Based on the above, literacy education for sustainable development must give people practical skills that will enable them to have a sustainable livelihood. These skills will differ with community conditions. The following, according to McClaren (1989), demonstrates the types of skills learners will need as adults. It is necessary to note that skills fall into one or more of the three realms of sustainable development – environmental, economic, and social.

- The ability to communicate effectively (both orally and in writing).
- The ability to think about systems (both natural and social sciences).
- The ability to think on time – to forecast, think ahead, and to plan. The ability to think critically about value issues.

Reinventing Literacy Education for Sustainable Livelihood in Nigeria

- The ability to separate number, quantity, quality, and value.
- The capacity to move from awareness to knowledge to action.
- The ability to work cooperatively with other people.
- The capacity to use these processes: Knowing, inquiring, acting, judging, imagining, connecting, valuing, and choosing.
- The capacity to develop an aesthetic response to the environment.
- Prepare materials for recycling.
- Harvest wild plants without jeopardizing future natural regeneration and production.

If we are to reap the full benefits of literacy education in our society, we need to understand it better and employ better mechanisms through which, literacy would bring about sustainable development and sustainability practices in Nigeria. This paper therefore explores literacy education as catalyst for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Literacy Education

Illiteracy is directly correlated with poverty and it affects society as a whole. Violence, drug abuse, prostitution, forced child labour; among others are results of the fatal mixture of poverty and lack of education. People who are illiterates face great challenges in their life, from their inability to get a decent work, to their personal health, to their families' wellbeing and the impact of illiteracy is enormous.

The year 2016 marks 50th anniversary of International Literacy Day and UNESCO is celebrating it under the banner 'Reading the Past, Writing the

Future". This is the first year of implementation of the year 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the vision of literacy is aligned with lifelong learning opportunities with special focus on youth and adults. Literacy is a part of Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. The target is that by 2030 all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (UNESCO, 2016).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2014) defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy is therefore, the door that leads to a continuous learning experience that permits people to reach their goals, develop their potential and gain knowledge in order to participate dynamically in the community. The 2003 NAAL adds a complementary skills-based definition of literacy that focuses on the knowledge and the skills an adult must possess in order to perform these tasks. These skills range from basic, word-level skills (such as recognizing words) to higher level skills (such as drawing appropriate inference from continuous text). New information provided by the NAAL 2003 is intended to improve understanding of the skill differences between adults who are able to perform relatively challenging literacy tasks and those who are not (NAAL, 2003)

Literacy is the ability to read, view, write, design, speak and listen in a way that allows you to communicate effectively. The

power of literacy, according to UNESCO (2012), lies not just in the ability to read and write, but rather in a person's capacity to apply these skills to effectively connect, interpret and discern the intricacies of the world in which they live. It is the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's knowledge and potential.

Literacy education empowers persons by providing tools to overcome poverty to improve their quality of life and their families; it gives them the knowledge to prevent the spread of health diseases, giving them a fair chance to succeed. When parents are literates, they can give to their children better opportunities to excel, which helps to break the vicious cycle of societal malignancies. Literacy education can therefore be seen as the most powerful weapon which can be used to change the world.

Sustainable Livelihood

Sustainable is to create a system that can keep going indefinitely into the future. Sustainable development is therefore a process for meeting human goal while sustaining the ability of natural systems to continue to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the economy and society depends. In modern sense, the concept has shifted to focus more on economic development, education development, social and environmental protection.

Sustainability and sustainable livelihood focus on balancing that line between competing needs: our need to move forward technologically and economically, and the needs to protect the environments in

which we and others live. It is the organizing principles for sustaining finite resources necessary to provide for the needs of future generations of life on the planet. It is a process that envisions a desirable future state for human societies in which living conditions and resource-use continue to meet human needs without undermining the 'integrity, stability and beauty' of natural environment (UNESCO, 2015).

Sustainable livelihood cannot be achieved by technology solutions, political regulation or financial instruments alone. We need to change the way we think and act. This requires quality education and learning for sustainable development at all levels and in social context (UNESCO, 2014). It is therefore the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

Literacy Education and Sustainable Livelihood in Nigeria

Sustainability education (SE), Education for sustainability (EFS), and Education for sustainable Development (ESD) are interchangeable terms describing the practice of teaching for sustainability. ESD is the term most used internationally and by the United Nations. Agenda 21 was the first international document that identified education as an essential tool for achieving sustainable development (Agenda 21 refers to the 21st century) (UN, 1992). It is about enabling us to constructively and creatively address present and future global challenges and create more sustainable and resilient societies.

Researchers in the area of literacy education (Mauch, 2014; White, Stallones

Reinventing Literacy Education for Sustainable Livelihood in Nigeria

and Last, 2014; & UNESCO, 2015) have stated that literacy education plays a major role in sustainable development by acting as the foundation for a long-lasting health environment, economic development, and social equity. Having the basic skills to read, write, do simple mathematics, and critically think are the focal points of being successful in business and economy, healthcare, and raising a family. A literate person can achieve a higher education and grow their knowledge of a particular subject allowing them to hold a successful career and even make advancements in the field. Through education, people learn how to analyse situations and devise strategies for growth, breaking the poverty cycle that plague millions of Nigeria people today.

Literacy education is indispensable to raise awareness and gather necessary grassroots participation in efforts to improve the way we care for our planet and manage its resources. The transformation can only happen if society's most vulnerable youth and adults acquire basic literacy skills that equip them with knowledge and confidence to improve their own live and build more resilient communities (United Nations, 2014; Bokova, 2015)

Literacy education for sustainable livelihood allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future. It is the foundation for a sustainable development, but in order for that sustainable to last, people cannot stop learning. Expanding the mind and constant obtaining new knowledge ensures growth, long-lasting sustainability among individuals and community, to enable it breaks the poverty circle as expected.

As more and more literacy programmes open around the country, there is the need to focus more on agriculture and community development now that the country is experiencing recession. This means supplementing literacy classes with instructional programmes on farming, money management, nutrition, diseases prevention, and so on. Coupled with the fact that majority of our farmers are illiterates. Through literacy education, farmers would be able to understand the nitty-gritty of planting, growing, harvesting, since producing food is important for the growth of individuals and the society at large. Literate farmers would know better how to produce crops without ruining them with mistakes such as putting too much fertilizer in the soil or even over watering. They also are better at keeping up with farming technology that allows them to improve their crops and produce even more (Alfalit, 2014).

Literacy education for sustainable livelihood therefore means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption and so on. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower adult learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development. Empowering adult learners to live responsible lives and to address complex global challenges means that literacy education has to promote competencies like critical thinking, imagining future scenario and making decisions in a collaborative way in Nigeria (UNESCO, 2014).

Literacy education for sustainable livelihood consequently promotes competencies like critical thinking,

imagining future scenario and making decisions in a collaborative way. Sustainability cannot be examined in isolation from social and economic constraints. In addition to environmental sustainability we also need to consider economic sustainability and social sustainability:

Literacy and Environmental Sustainability

Environmental literacy encompasses experience, understanding and action. Knowledge and understanding are important components of being an environmental literate citizen, yet the key is the connection between what people know and what people do. According to Ardoin and Merrick (2013), environmental literacy helps communities to prepare for natural disasters and assists families in the recovery process after they have occurred. It helps members of the garbage collecting to improve the environment by spreading the concept and practice of waste disposal in the community; produced greater awareness about environmental issues and facilitated the cooperation between different communities to reduce environmental degradation, particularly to reduce emission, such as carbon dioxide to prevent adverse climate change, that is, global warming in future which if not prevented will have disastrous consequences for the welfare and development of the population, both in developing and developed countries.

Poverty in developing countries can be traced to environmental degradation. Poor people rely on natural resources more than the rich. For survival the rural poor are forced to cut forest for timber and fuel as

well as graze animals on pasture lands more than the reproductive capacity of these natural resources. Unfortunately, it is often the illiterate poor who suffer most from the consequences of pollution and environment degradation. Unlike the rich, the illiterate poor cannot afford to protect themselves from contaminated water; in the cities they are more likely to spend much of their time on the streets breathing polluted air; in rural areas they are more likely to cook on open fires of wood or dung inhaling dangerous fumes; their lands are more likely to suffer from soil erosion (White, Stallones & Last, 2013). There is no doubt about the fact that our nation's future relies on literate public to be wise stewards of the very environment that sustains us, our families and communities, and future generations. Thus, environmental education is required to help us as individuals to make conceptual connections between economic prosperity, enhanced environmental health, improved wellbeing and successful strategy for environmental management.

The twin goals of learning are to acquire knowledge and gain skills such as problem solving, consensus building, information management, communication, and critical and creative thinking. Environmental issues offer excellent vehicles for developing and exercising many of these skills using a system approach (Chapman, 2014). To ensure that learners have ample opportunities to increase their environmental literacy and enhance their academic achievement, literacy programmes should incorporate environmental issues into their curriculum. There is thus the need to expand the scope by introducing the knowledge gained through

Reinventing Literacy Education for Sustainable Livelihood in Nigeria

literacy education to develop their roles and capacities through writing, editing and publishing books for the youths and adults in their community. This programme should aim at responding to the existing problems in the community (UIL, 2013)

The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), in Ardoin and Merrick (2013), stated that an environmentally literate person, both individually and together with others, makes informed decisions concerning the environment; is willing to act on these decisions to improve the well-being of other individuals, societies, and participates in civic life. Those who are environmentally literate possess, to varying degrees:

- Knowledge and understanding of a wide range of environmental concepts, problems, and issues;
- A set of cognitive and affective dispositions;
- A set of cognitive skills and abilities;
- The appropriate behavioural strategies to apply such knowledge and understanding in order to make sound and effective decisions in a range of environmental contexts.

A society without proficient readers cannot expect to achieve a sustainable future. Nigeria can therefore focus attention on the following measures using literacy education:

- Ensuring clean and hygienic living and working conditions for the people;
- Ensure safety against known and proven industrial hazards;
- Sponsor research on environmental issues pertaining to the area;
- Find economical methods for

salvaging hazardous industrial wastes;

- Encourage afforestation;
- Find out substitutes for proven hazardous materials based on local resources and needs instead of blindly depending on advanced nations to find solutions;
- Ensuring environmental education as a part of school and college curriculum;
- Encourage use of non-conventional sources of energy, especially solar energy;
- As far as possible, production of environment-friendly products should be encouraged;
- Use of organic fertilizers and other bio techniques should be popularized;
- Environmental management is the key for sustainable development, and it should include monitoring and accountability; and,
- Need for socialization and also humanization of all environmental issues.

Literacy and Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is the capacity of people to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefit of growth. Economic empowerment increases people's access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market

information. It can also refer to the economic empowerment of groups that are powerless. It consists of giving a group of people the means to be in control of their own economic destiny. It consists of helping people improve their economic status while, at the same time, gaining more control over their status.

To provide adults with the skills necessary to function with the work-place in order to increase productivity levels. Literacy education should be built into programme of vocational education and training, in which literacy skills and attitudes were taught and developed. Indeed, the links established between a literate adult and productivity, and the inferred relationship between this and national economic development should take a functional and community-based approach, linking literacy education programmes with income-generating activities and practical skill training (Lynn, 2014). The programmes aimed at supporting participants in organizing themselves into community based self-help groups and committees to receive financial and technical support from the government for local development. The income generating activities will bring about improved employability and promoting active citizenship, thus facilitating the involvement of individuals in all aspects of economic and social life. It will also enhance opportunities for lifelong and training, especially for young people and adults living in poverty, and to improve access to vocational and professional education.

Literacy and Social Equality

In most developing countries/ low-income countries, girls are both less likely to

attend school than boys and more likely to drop out. This disparity helps explain why two-thirds of the world's 781million illiterates are women. Social equality cannot exist if some people are very highly educated and others are completely illiterates. The illiterate ones will never be able to play their full part in the development of our country or of themselves, and they will always be in danger of being exploited by the great knowledge of others. Therefore, we should plan to overcome the existing high level of illiteracy (Nyerere, 1971). This established the fact that eradication of illiteracy was seen as a key link in the struggle for social equity in any society.

The primary aim of social equality programme should be to fight social injustice and reduce inequalities in gender and educational access by providing literacy education and empowering adult learners (especially women) to produce sustainable changes in their communities. An educated woman has high educational and career expectations of her children, both boys and girls. She creates more equitable lives for women and their families and increases their ability to participate in community decision making and work toward achieving local sustainability goals (Aaron, 2015).

In essence, women can yield enormous benefits for overall human welfare in poor communities. In most societies, women bear the primary responsibility for child care, household management and environmental management. By empowering women through literacy education, decision-making and productive resources, communities can achieve enormous economic and social progress.

Reinventing Literacy Education for Sustainable Livelihood in Nigeria

Conclusion

This paper established the fact that the current environmental, economic and social development trends in the Nigerian society are not sustainable and that literacy education can bring about environmental sustainability, sustained economic growth and social equality. It transforms lives. It can improve health, reduce diseases, encourage tolerance and political participation, encourage environmental friendly behavior, and empower adults to make the right decisions for them and build a more sustainable development for the youths and adults. Literacy education therefore has important spillover effects on reducing poverty and hunger, reducing child and maternal mortality, and ensuring environmental sustainability, thereby inciting the need for a more gender responsive approach to development policy in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing background, the researchers are compelled to make the following recommendations:

- Environmental, economic and social topics should be integrated into the

core curricula of or used as an integrating theme across the curriculum of literacy programmes in Nigeria. This is necessary on the ground that participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their real-life experiences in relation to climate change.

- Literacy programmes should take a functional and community-based approach, linking literacy education programmes with income-generating activities and practical skill training in the country.
- Literacy education for sustainable development must give people practical skills that will enable them to have a sustainable livelihood, and to live sustainable lives.
- Literacy education programmes should combine the three dimensions of sustainable development – social equity, economic development and environmental empowerment. For example, adult literacy centres basic literacy and vocational training for youths and adults.

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Reinventing Literacy Education for Sustainable Livelihood in Nigeria

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