

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND POLICY DIRECTIONS TOWARD 2030

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Abstract

Functional literacy refers to the application of reading, writing, numeracy, and increasingly, digital competencies in every sphere of human life. For Nigeria, with her large population, functional literacy is vital to human capital development, poverty reduction and democratic stability. Today, it is sad to observe that while enrolment in primary education has grossly increased, functional literacy acquisition is hampered. Furthermore, reports from UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (2023) identify Nigeria as one of the countries with the largest populations of illiterate adults globally. The global push by the United Nations in 2023 toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4, which commits countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities reinforce the urgency for policy reforms to integrate literacy. This research, therefore, is aimed at investigating the place of functional literacy in national development, identifying those barriers to its achievement in contemporary Nigeria and suggesting viable measures to improve and implement the policies toward 2030. In view of this, the study adopts three sociological theories, the Functionalist theory founded by Emile Durkheim in the 20th Century which states that functional literacy is central to the achievement of the social, economical and political stability of any society. Theory of Human Capital by Gary Becker, Adam Smith and Theodore Schultz (1964) argues that literacy is central to labour productivity and modernization theory by Max Weber and Karl Max (1950) links literacy to democratic participation and social mobility. Data collected involved government reports, National Policy on Education and global reports on SDG 4, AU Agenda 2063. Findings show that there are challenges such as inequities, poor financing, weak teacher capacity, and lack of quality learning materials. The study, therefore, recommends evidence-informed policy directions; the alignment of functional literacy policy with labour-market demands, digital literacy frameworks, and inclusive financing mechanisms as indispensable tools for improving functional literacy and accelerating sustainable national development agenda via 2030.

Keywords: Literacy, Functional literacy, National development, Policy, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4

Introduction

Literacy is widely recognized as a cornerstone of human capital formation and a critical determinant of national development. Functional literacy, unlike basic literacy, goes beyond the mere ability to decode words; it entails the application of reading, writing, and numeracy skills to solve everyday problems and participate meaningfully in society. In the context of Nigeria, a country with one of the largest youth populations in the world, the state of functional literacy has direct implications for labour productivity, poverty reduction, governance, and social inclusion.

Despite decades of educational reforms, Nigeria continues to grapple with low literacy outcomes. As of 2020 to 2022, the literacy rate among adults showed only modest improvement, while millions of children remained out of school. Regional disparities, gender gaps and poor quality of teaching further compounded the crisis. These realities posed a serious threat to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) on quality education and lifelong learning as the country approached 2023. The world leaders of 193 nation states to which Nigeria is a member, during the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly on 25th September, 2015, took a historic step when they adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development envisions a present and a future that is economically sustainable, socially inclusive and environmentally resilient. This is expressed in the 17 SDGs, 169 target and 230 key performance indicators. It is a comprehensive policy blueprint, a universal call to action to end poverty, safeguard the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by the year, 2030. Goals 1 to 7 fall under the social pillar of sustainable development and they refer to the household targets of no poverty, good nutrition, health, education, gender equality, clean water supply, sanitation and access to sustainable energy. Goals 8 to 12 falls under the economic pillar and provides target for the economy in terms of decent work, economic growth, innovation, infrasture, income inequalities, sustainable cities and responsible consumption and production. Goals 13, 14 and 15 form the environmental pillar and provide target for the care of the planet, in

terms of climate, life under water and land respectively. Goals 16 and 17 refer to the important governance goals for the agenda of peace, strong institutions and partnerships for the SDGs.

The UN 2030 Agenda document specifies Mols to achieve the SDGs. These include: Finance, Technology, Capacity-Building, Trade, Policy and Institutional Coherence, Multi-Stakeholders Partnerships and Data, Monitoring and Accountability. Among all these, Functional Literacy is the central tool for the implementation of the SDGs. Bearing this context in mind; this paper explores Functional literacy and its place in national development.

Statement of the Problem

Research has shown that in Nigeria, while enrolment in primary education has increased functional literacy acquisition which is vital for human capital development, poverty reduction and democratic stability is hampered. Reports from UNESCO Global Education Monitoring also identify Nigeria as one of the countries with the largest populations of illiterate adults globally. The persistence of these challenges and the global push toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4, which commits countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities as prescribed by the United Nations in 2023 underlie the urgency for policy reforms. This paper, therefore, investigates functional literacy in relation to Nigeria's national development agenda toward 2030.

Contextual Framework

Literacy: An Overview

Literacy is one subject that cannot be easily defined because it means different things to different people and scholars. Traditionally, it is referred to the ability to read and write. Gradually, it included the use of numeracy and technology. Today, it is not about being literate or illiterate anymore, but having adequate skills for today's demands. According to Hillerich (1978), it is the demonstration of competence in communication skills; critical thinking and problem-solving which enables the individual to function appropriately, independently in the society and with potentials for progress in the society. Uzodimma (1993) identified types of literacy such as 'pre-literacy' to 'dysfunctional literacy' to 'computer literacy', all of which he united in purpose, function, and significance. In view of this, Postman (1978) states that literacy should be tied to a nation's aspiration and efforts to liberate the individual, hence, the importance of functional literacy.

Functional Literacy

Functional literacy is defined as the application of reading, writing, numeracy, and increasingly, digital competencies in everyday activities. UNESCO (2023) defines it as the ability to use literacy skills for effective functioning in society. In the Nigerian discourse, functional literacy is often linked to employability, social participation, and civic engagement (World Bank, 2023). Today, with the emergence of digital technology: robotics, coding, artificial intelligence and others, it is expedient that in functional literacy, stakeholders; the government, curriculum designers, policy makers, etc should consider those innovations to better equip an individual to function actively in national development. The sociologist, Becker (1964) argues that literacy is central to labour productivity. Modernization theorists link literacy to democratic participation and social mobility, and from the standpoint of Street (2001), a sociocultural theorist, literacy practices are context-bound; thus, functional literacy must be aligned with everyday realities of learners. These perspectives reinforce the need for policies that integrate functional literacy into livelihood and community practices.

The Concept of National Development

The implications of functional literacy on national development, having looked at the destabilizing effects of illiteracy in Nigeria are enormous. Different authors have different definitions of national development. Elugbe (1990) refers to national development as the growth of the nation in terms of unity, education, economic well-being, mass participation in government, etc. Tadro (1977) states:

Development is the process of improving all human lives. He, further, gives three equally important aspects of development as raising people's living conditions; that is, their income, medical services, consumption level of food, education, etc, through relevant economic growth, creating conditions conducive to the growth of people's esteem through the establishment of social, political and economic systems and institutions which promote human dignity, increasing people's freedom to choose by enlarging the range of their choice variables, for example, increasing varieties of consumer goods and services.

Rogers (1969) agrees with the above and explains that national development is a type of social change in which new ideas are introduced into a social system in order to produce higher per capita income and levels of living through more modern methods and improved social organization.

Functional Literacy as an integral element of National Development

The relationship between literacy and development is well-established. National development is achievable when the citizens enjoy structural and technological springs or leaps triggered mainly by their own efforts. Such achievements cannot be made by citizens who are functionally illiterate. The Human-capital theorists, Gary Becker, Adam Smith and Theodore Schultz (1964) argue that education enhances productivity, innovation, and income levels, thereby driving national economic growth. In developing contexts, functional literacy directly impacts women's empowerment, agricultural productivity, health outcomes, and political participation. In Nigeria, high illiteracy rates have been tied to low productivity in informal labour markets, voter disenfranchisement, and entrenched poverty (NERDC, 2025). However, it is the opinion of the researcher that the National Policy on Education be restructured to accommodate and foster educational activities and trainings that will promote proper and appropriate training of the individual for full participation in the development of self and the nation.

Global and Nigerian Policy Context

Globally, SDG 4 calls for equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. Regionally, the African Union's Agenda 2063 emphasizes literacy as a pillar of inclusive development. Nationally, Nigeria has made policy strides through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme, the activities of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), curriculum reforms by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), and the National Digital Literacy Framework (NITDA, 2024). Despite these frameworks, learning outcomes remain poor, as evidenced by international and national assessment data.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, documentary research approach. Data sources include policy documents (UBE Act, UBEC reports, NERDC curriculum frameworks), global and regional commitments (SDG 4, AU Agenda 2063), statistical databases (World Bank literacy indicators, UNESCO Institute for Statistics), and peer-reviewed academic literature. Secondary data from Nigerian think tanks, NGOs, and development partners are also utilized. Content analysis is employed to extract dominant themes around challenges, opportunities, and policy gaps (UNESCO, 2023).

Discussion of Findings

Studies have shown that despite massive enrollment recorded in lower primary education, Nigeria continues to record poor literacy outcomes. Many children complete primary and even post-primary schooling without acquiring basic reading and numeracy competencies. Adult literacy rates remain below global averages, with stark regional disparities between the North and South, and between rural and urban areas (UNESCO, 2023).

In post-secondary education, there is a lack of motivation and the inability to adapt to study new skills by the students. While some are lazy, others are victims of the unfavourable socio-economic situation of Nigeria. Some end up disengaging entirely from the system. This affects national development.

Challenges and Prospects of Functional Literacy in Nigeria

One of the factors militating against the attainment of functional literacy is the increasing population without commensurate increase in productivity. Many adults and youth are unemployed, this produces unbridled poverty. The very poor socio-economic situation drives so many out of their homes just to get the daily bread, many children are on the streets being used as beggars even by their own parents. A good number of parents are selling their own children to make money. The youth have turned into kidnappers, armed robbers and ritualists. Who cares about literacy?

Non-implementation of the National Policy on Education is another factor. Education in Nigeria is an instrument "par excellence" for effecting national development. Although, the National Policy on Education has stressed this, the implementation has been at a zero-point.

Moreover, with the evolvement of digital technology and other skills which attract the interest of the global labour market, there is an urgent need to restructure the National Policy on Education to accelerate functional literacy by the doing the following:

- i. Promoting strongly early-grade literacy by focusing on reading and numeracy in the first three years of primary school.
- ii. Scaling up adult and non-formal education with flexible, community-based programmes.
- iii. Leveraging technology (radio, TV, mobile apps) for literacy delivery.
- iv. Promoting the use of digital tools in teaching and learning.

Ensuring teachers' training and good payment are essential for the actualization of functional literacy.

Grants, even when they are given, are misallocated or diverted. Research that would rekindle literacy drives and promote national development seems abandoned or haphazardly carried out.

Well-equipped and certified personnel have, to a large extent, been a bane to the realization and attainment of full literacy in Nigeria. The teaching field has also been infiltrated by academically unsound teachers who have no passion or zeal to transform lives but their personal pockets. Examination malpractice and sorting, bribery and corruption are at their peak in our universities. Professors are even used to rig elections. What a misnomer in a developing nation!

Migration for either the enhancement of economic status and/ or security has led to the loss of highly skilled professionals who have migrated for better opportunities, leading to shortage in teachers and other professionals who have been impacting human capacity building. The aftermath is the reduced tax revenue, consumer spending and the sudden mandatory Taxation Identity, to generate extensively from the masses.

External aids and grants from international bodies that show interest in literacy development are usually not given to the appropriate quarters. Most reading materials that are labeled 'not for sale' are spread out in the market. Apart from the gross misappropriation and inadequacy of such aids, they suffer very serious national insecurity and orientation.

The Nigerian media that should be supportive of pre-literacy, literacy and post literacy courses and programmes are not fully available. They are always on and off, with more interest in advertisements and other profit-oriented programmes. The activities of the African Adult Education Association (AAEO) based at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and the Literacy studies and courses organized at the University of Ibadan which the media ably projected to the favourable mentioning of UNESCO (1978) seem to have waned. Most tele-tutors have dropped on the way because of the following reasons: a loss of interest among the general audience, lack of motivation on the part of the teacher, lack of funds to sustain the programme. Moreover, eminent Nigerian leaders and philanthropists that should have funded such programmes are more interested in politics, advertizing themselves and their families, personal projects and other areas of national life than literacy works and programmes.

Religious institutions who were once strong promoters of literacy have made it inaccessible to the Poor because of the exorbitant financial obligation attached to it. The interest in literacy development as a means of mass emancipation is poor since individual rather than national prosperity is at the apex position. Mission schools are more expensive even though, of a high standard. Literacy initiatives and sacrifices made by Archbishop Shanahan, Bishop Ajayi Crowther, Rev Fr Gilbert Ohai, etc, are available to the richer bidders.

Non-implementation of the language policy which states that the government shall ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment, today, the Nigerian child is compelled to learn English first and the mother tongue can be taken up later in senior primary and as an elective subject in senior secondary despite the known fact that children learn best in their mother tongue or language of the immediate environment.

However, if government and the elite should embark on aggressive and steady literacy programmes, Nigerians would be liberated and the masses would be sensitized. Effective literacy policy made and implemented would go a long way to improve the citizens' aesthetic and civic qualities. Also qualitative and quantitative literacy would harmonize and sharpen Nigerians impression about themselves and others. Dynamic literacy would go a long way to transform the economy of the nation since it can place Nigeria above her over-dependence on oil.

Strategies for promoting Functional literacy in Nigeria

Government has the greatest stake in literacy development. Without a stable political environment, peace and harmony, illiteracy cannot be tackled in Nigeria. According to UNESCO (1978), any government that tackles illiteracy with total commitment has set a pre-condition for favourable social change. Government should, therefore, insist on partnership with individuals, organizations and foreign bodies to promote literacy. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka partnered with Chisco Group of Companies, a transportation company based in Anambra State. The aftermath of this relationship was the building of a gigantic edifice for the Faculty of Arts and the establishment of Chisco Institute for Transportation Studies in 2015. The programme was aimed at providing literacy on auto mechanic/mechatronics, transportation operation, car driving, rail line operations, aviation operations, etc. The Leo Stan Ekeh Foundation has a centre at Imo State University, Owerri where entrepreneurial programmes which focus on practical skills, career planning and financial grants are offered to empower students and their trainees. This has existed with many testimonies from the beneficiaries.

Companies producing literacy materials like books, papers, pens, chalk, teaching equipment, reading materials both local and foreign should be encouraged. Effort should be made to prevent wasteful and dangerous importation of such materials.

Government and politicians should sponsor literacy programmes, seminars, workshops like English Language Teachers' (ELT) monthly workshops, competitions like Spelling Bee, Creative writing competition, Primary School Teachers' Computer Literacy Skills Acquisition (PSTCLSA), other skills acquisition programmes, literacy workshops and a host of others instead of sponsoring competitions that promote nudity and immorality like Big Brother Naija.

Media stations should go back to promoting pre-literacy, literacy and post-literacy programmes and competitions. Tele-tutors and online teachers should also be encouraged and supported through sponsorship in their varied literacy programmes. Research has shown that literacy is most functional when distributed through the mother tongue. Schools should use the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment to distribute knowledge in the classroom especially at pre-primary and lower primary school levels. Parents, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) and philanthropists should see the urgency in the need to promote literacy in Nigeria. They can donate books and other literacy-related materials to schools, colleges and universities. They can also sponsor media literacy programmes, e-books and others.

Conclusion

Nigeria is gradually approaching 2030 yet functional literacy is still a critical but underachieved priority. Functional literacy remains the anchor for Nigeria's sustainable development, social cohesion and competitiveness in the knowledge economy. Many factors are responsible for the mismatch between the nation's literacy development efforts and the obtained results like unstable political climate, insecurity, unreliable elections and results, ethnicity, weak socio-economic base, apathy among the elite, misplacement of values in the society, poor educational goals and poor implementation of educational policies. While policies existed on paper, the implementation was hampered by weak institutions, poor financing and inadequate programme delivery. These have to be addressed. To unlock the transformative potential of literacy, Nigeria must go beyond enrolment figures and focus on ensuring that every citizen acquires functional literacy skills that translate into improved livelihoods, active citizenship, and enhanced human capital. The road to 2030 requires deliberate alignment of functional literacy initiatives with digital competencies, equity-focused interventions and stronger accountability frameworks. By prioritizing functional literacy as both a right and a development imperative, Nigeria can unlock the full potential of its human capital.

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