

# Basic and Functional Literacy and the Attainment of Vision 20-2020 in Nigeria

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of basic and functional literacy in achieving the Vision 20:2020 in Nigeria. Despite her abundant human and material resources, Nigeria is plagued with high rate of illiteracy. The country is ranked among the nine countries with the highest population of illiterate individuals in the world, i.e. the group otherwise known as the E9 Countries which comprises of Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan. Without doubt, this contributes in one way or the other to the socio-economic backwardness of the country. Nigerian government recently launched a development plan known as Vision 20:2020. The Vision seeks to position Nigeria as one of the top 20 economies in the world by the year 2020. The framework wants to use agriculture, industrial and service sectors to grow the economy at an average of 13.5% over the next five years. However, this paper recognised the important role of a literate society in achieving any development plan by emphasizing on effective and efficient basic and functional literacy programmes in the delivery of the Vision 20:2020. Some of the recommendations made includes: rejuvenation of adult basic literacy programmes in Nigeria's Local Government Areas to cater for the non-literate adults at the grass-root level; constant training and re-training of workers handling literacy programmes for functionality; and adequate funding should be made available to the institutions saddled with the responsibilities of planning and implementing adult literacy programmes in the country.

**Keywords:** Literacy, education, development, vision 20:2020, Nigeria.

## 1. Introduction

Literacy is one of the concepts which has proved to be both complex and dynamic because it continued to be defined and interpreted in diverse ways. People's notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values and personal experiences (UNESCO, 2006). Most common assumptions or belief about being literate is to have 'reading, writing and numeracy' skills. However, many arguments have been raised to look into whether these reading, writing and arithmetic skills are enough to qualify a person as 'literate' in this ever-changing world. The environmental challenges, innovations and inventions, technological advancement as well as various issues and problems facing humanity today also deepen our understanding and advanced our perspectives about being literate or illiterate. We believe that as society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies to cut it short. These literacies are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups. However, the concern of this paper is not to just examine the various angles or perspectives of literacy but to look into its relevance and applicability to the meeting of various development plans set by Nigerian government in achieving national development. Prominent of them is the Vision 20:2020, a framework design to place Nigeria in the comity of biggest and largest economy in the world by the year 2020.

### 1.1 Defining Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Context

Literacy has being defined in a number of ways by diverse scholars and practitioners in education and development fields. The term 'literacy', for example, sometimes refers only to reading, sometimes to reading and writing and sometimes, to reading, writing and arithmetic. Some believed to be literate means to have competence or knowledge in a specified area. However, in today's knowledge society, literacy has begun to be used in a much wider and broader sense to refer to other skills and competencies. For instance, we now talk about 'information literacy', 'financial literacy', 'computer literacy', 'visual literacy', 'media literacy' and 'scientific literacy', among others. This shows that as society and technology change, so does literacy. As Education Development Centre (2012) put it, 'the power of literacy lies not only in the ability to read and write, but rather in an individual's capacity to put those skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life'. Similarly, UNESCO (2010) submitted that

Literacy is at the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.

Similarly, the Centre for Literacy (2014) put literacy to be:

a complex set of abilities needed to understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture – alphabets, numbers, visual icons – for personal and community development. It touches every aspect of individual and community life. It is an essential foundation for learning through life, and must be valued as a human right.

Furthermore, Canadian Council of Learning (2007) further emphasized literacy to be:

an essential part of the fabric of modern societies, a thread that links all aspects of life and living in our contemporary world. Its reach is extensive and complex, influencing how fully and effectively a person is able to engage in the social and economic life of his or her community.

In addition to the above submissions, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2008) summarised what literacy should achieve in today's knowledge economy. According to the Organization's report, active, successful participants in this 21st century global society must be able to

- Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology;
- Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought;
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts;
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

In summary, all the above submissions on literacy revealed the dynamic nature of this Century and the required efforts that all the development practitioners must make if literacy is one of the tools set to achieve sustainable development.

## 1.2 Basic and Functional Literacy

Basic literacy has been popularly defined as form of abilities to read, write, and do basic arithmetic or numeracy. Barton (2006) asserts that the notion of basic literacy is used for the initial learning of reading and writing which adults who have never been to school need to go through. The International Council for Adult Education (2003) further expanded this by explaining basic literacy to be a form of 'learning to read and write (text and numbers), reading and writing to learn, and developing these skills and using them effectively for meeting basic needs'. Functional literacy, however, is seen as the broader concept of literacy. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1997) defines functional literacy as:

the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work, and in the community—to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.

Similarly, Canadian Council of Learning Report (2007) has the following to say about functional literacy:

true literacy encompasses much more than just these basic skills. It includes the ability to analyse things, understand general ideas or terms, use symbols in complex ways, apply theories, and perform other necessary life skills—including the ability to engage in the social and economic life of the community.

The submissions above shows that, unlike basic literacy, which focuses majorly on acquiring skills, functional literacy deals with how people actually use such skills to live and work in society. Furthermore, Schlechty (2014) defined functional illiteracy to be 'reading and writing skills that are inadequate to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level'. In other words, functional literacy could be seen as the ability of individuals to possess the reading and writing skills that are adequate to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level.

It is very pertinent, however, to clarify between basic literacy and functional literacy by stating clearly their characteristics. Purely illiterate persons cannot read or write in any capacity, for all practical purposes. In contrast, functionally illiterate persons can read and possibly write simple sentences with a limited vocabulary, but cannot read or write well enough to deal with the everyday requirements of life in their own society. For example, someone without adequate knowledge of birth control, HIV/AIDS prevention, no matter the level of education could be said to be functional illiterate in the area of reproductive health system, while a Professor of Language who could not operate computer could be seen as functional illiterate in the computer world.

In further establishment of the true meaning of the two words 'functional literacy', according to the American Heritage College Dictionary (1997), functional is defined as "capable of performing" (p. 551), and literacy is defined as "the ability to read and write" (p. 792). If we combine these definitions, it seems reasonable to describe functional literacy as the capability of an individual in reading and writing at a level proficient enough to conduct one's daily affairs.

## 2. The Nigeria's Vision 20:2020 and the place of Literacy in its Realization

With the population of over 160 million people, Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa, endowed with

human and material resources and a leading production of crude oil, cocoa and rubber in the continent. Ironically, the high rate of poverty and illiteracy continues to ravage the potentially wealthy country. A recent report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) says that Nigeria's illiteracy rate is about 45 per cent. Similarly, the current Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring report ranks Nigeria as one of the countries with the highest level of illiteracy. The report stated that the number of illiterate adults in the country has increased by 10 million over the past two decades, to reach 35 million. This percentage constitutes the outrageous number of out-of-school children, mostly found in the Northern part of the country which was recently put at 10.5 million, thousands of non-literate adults and out-of-school youths, and illiterate women who are mostly found in the rural communities doing farm works and other agricultural businesses without reading, writing and arithmetic skills. In order to address various social and economic challenges affecting the nation and place her on a development pedal globally, Nigeria government proposed what is known as 'Vision 20:2020', a development plan that will pilot the country into becoming one of the 20 'economic giants' in the world by the year 2020. The target for year 2020 was based on a dynamic comparative analysis of the country's potential growth rate and economic structure vis-à-vis those of other developed economies in the world. Achieving the Vision 20:2020 implies that the Nigerian economy must grow at an average of 13.5% over the years toward the year 2020. Agricultural and industrial sectors are expected to drive the growth at the earlier stage while service sector will take over at the latter stage. That is, the economy would transform from agro-allied industrialization to service-based economy in line with the theory of economic development. The plan is expected to achieve the vision that:

By the year 2020, Nigeria will have a large, strong, diversified, competitive, technologically enabled economy that effectively harnesses the talents and energy of its people and responsibly exploits its national endowments to guarantee a high standard of living and quality of life to its citizens.

Vision 20:2020 is anchored on the recognition that the people are the most essential assets of any nation. However, the need to establish a literate society cannot be over-emphasized in achieving this lofty plan of the Federal Government of Nigeria. In other words, if the framework would be a reality and not a mirage, the Federal Government of Nigeria must make efforts to tackle the problem of illiteracy in the country so as to prepare the hands and minds of the entire citizenry toward achieving the Vision.

### 3. Conclusion and Recommendations

Thus far, various perspectives of literacy and its relevance to the achievement of Nigeria's Vision 20:2020 have been examined. Given the nation's history of wide income inequality, which is manifested in large-scale poverty, unemployment and poor access to healthcare, the disconnect between our economic growth and human development has to be addressed to increase the well-being and ultimately labour productivity of our people. Literacy has been identified as essential to tackling the problems of poverty and inequality. Looking at the vision and its components, it is not out of place to say that its achievement is hinged upon the establishment of effective and sustainable basic and functional literacy programmes which is capable of equipping the citizens with requisite skills and knowledge required to deliver the set Vision by the set year. Based on this fact, the following are recommended:

- i. Establishment and adequate funding of more adult literacy centres in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria so as to cater for the literacy needs of the millions illiterate adults in the country.
- ii. Development of a workable and sustainable framework to organize and monitor the already existing programmes for improving formal and non-formal education targeted towards the marginalised and disadvantaged groups in the country.
- iii. Training and re-training of administrators and facilitators handling adult literacy programme in the country so as to keep them updated and relevant with the current global trend.

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