

## **A Pre-View of Government Efforts in Promoting Mass Literacy in Nigeria: Lessons from Adult Education Historical Research**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examined past government efforts in promoting mass literacy in the country with a view to drawing out implications and lessons from adult education historical research that could guide future literacy attempts. A pre-view of the past revealed that despite all attempts to give illiteracy a running battle, the menace has remained intractable to the extent that Nigeria is regarded as one of the E-9 countries with the largest concentration of illiterates. This is substantiated by the 2008 Global Monitoring Report which gave the most recent literacy rate for Nigeria as 69%, meaning that 31% of the population of about 150 million are still illiterate. This indicates that none of the literacy efforts attempted in Nigeria so far have produced the desired results. This study identified ineffective education policies, lack of political and national wills, financial inadequacy, poor planning and implementation strategies, lack of reliable baseline data, and lack of commitment on the part of leaders, among others, as prime causes of the failures. As a way out of the impasse, the study calls for revision of the country's basic education Act of 2004; enforcement of reasonable acts and policies backed with fund, determined political will and decisive action by the government, effective programme planning and execution, mobilization of National Youth Corps members, training and retraining of literacy facilitators, and popular participation of Nigerians in order to enable future literacy efforts yield desired results. With the above suggestions, it is hoped that the graph of illiteracy rate in Nigeria will drop sharply in no long time.

**Key words:** Government efforts, mass literacy, illiteracy and adult education

### **1.Introduction (Relevance of the Past)**

The importance of history has been established by literature regardless of its criticism in contemporary times. According to Ajayi (1990) and Omolewa (1995), the clamour by individualized world such as Britain and America to make use of history at a length is because it is pertinent that people understand their past so they can map out effective strategies for future efforts. In essence, people need to allow the lessons of the past to guide them to avoid past mistakes so that the future of mankind can be bright. Corroborating this view, Akinpelu (1981) submitted that there is nothing new under the sun, as most of the problems of the past are the ones recurrent in the present, hence the need to use the tool of the past to solve the current educational problems. In a similar vein, Verner (1964) had posited that adult educators wishing to build on a substantial foundation, will need to capitalize on gains of the past as to avoid past mistakes. Still stressing on this point, Hellenbeck (1938) advised educators to endeavour to understand the modifications that must be made within the framework of a changed and changing society and concentrate on experimentation in untried areas as a means of avoiding the failures of the past. The contribution of Ajayi (1990), a history scholar, is relevant as he submitted that history helps in the extraction from the past lessons for the present and the future, which would in turn help in the understanding and handling of prevailing problems. He further emphasized that since the past coexists with the present, there is no way to study the present without recourse to history which is a study of both change and of continuity. Be that as it may, Verner (1964), one of the foremost adult educators, put the matter straight when he observed that the failure to look back in adult education delivery has inevitably led to the persistent recurrence of the same problems, generation after generation. However, in the views of Sarumi (2005), the above justifications notwithstanding, history still has its weaknesses; for in the absence of dependable recurring circumstances, too much confidence cannot be placed on the lessons of history.

It is in the light of all these that this paper examined past Government efforts in promoting literacy education for all with a view to drawing out implications and lessons from past experiences that could guide future mass education practices in Nigeria.

### **2. A Pre-View of Government Efforts in Promoting Mass Literacy Education in Nigeria**

The history of adult education in Nigeria dates back to the 1940s when, as a result of commitment, government institutions started to organize evening classes. Aderinoye (2004) substantiated this assertion when he stated that Holy Trinity Anglican School started evening classes in Kano in 1940 and that an experiment in literacy and community development began in Udi District of present Enugu State in 1942 by Edward Rowland Chadwick, the then District Officer. Still on this, Anyanwu (1980) revealed that the colonial government fervently prosecuted as from 1943 the substitution of existing indigenous and Islamic adult education with Western adult education programmes as an attempt to mobilize the support and contributions of Nigerians to the war efforts.

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, there was an accelerated demand for literacy education as the colonial government realized the need for mass education of Nigerians if their programmes were to succeed. Accordingly, in 1946, a veteran soldier, Major A.J. Carpenter who had experience in Literacy education in the army, was appointed the first mass education officer for Nigeria. With the vision of making majority of the people literate, a ten-year mass literacy campaign, the first in the country, was launched the same year 1946 for a limited period of three years to start with, and further two years for a mop-up operation, followed by another five years of post-literacy. In spite of some careful planning and collaborations of individuals and NGOs, the campaign failed due to lack of colonial administration's commitment to literacy for all, the attitude of which frustrated some officers out of literacy sector (Omolewa, 1981).

The introduction of Free Primary Education scheme by both the Western Regional and Eastern Regional Governments in 1955 and 1956 respectively served as a greater booster to literacy efforts, though such schemes were short-lived due to heavy financial involvement and other forces which those regional governments could not content with.

It was not until 1974 – 1984 period that the Nigerian government embarked on a new campaign for literacy promotion when Chief A.Y. Eke was the Minister for Education. Unfortunately, this effort was hampered, according to Sarumi (2005) by lack of fund, poor recruitment of instructors, inadequate literacy training, and lack of knowledge about the essence of literacy, among other reasons. However, the fact remains that it was the enthusiasm of Nigerian government for mass literacy that informed entrenchment of adult education in the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977. The implementation Committee for the NPE recommended in 1978 that the first task of the National Commission for Mass Education (NMEC) was to float a mass literacy campaign (Blueprint, 1978/79), while the Nigerian Constitution of 1979 provided that government would strive to eradicate illiteracy, hence the efforts of the Federal government in providing free, compulsory and Universal Primary Education (UPE), free secondary education, and free adult literacy programme in 1976.

The year 1979 witnessed another vision for mass literacy campaign through the launching of a ten-year mass literacy programme on 8<sup>th</sup> September, 1982 by the then Shehu Shagari administration which declared 1982 – 1992 as literacy decade. Till date Nigeria celebrates 8<sup>th</sup> of September every year as mass literacy day. Like previous attempts, this literacy effort failed. Omolewa (1996) and Sarumi (2005) provided us with the understanding that the 1988 literacy campaign could not be successful because of lack of reliable data and non-involvement of the people that the programme was meant for as well as lack of commitment from government itself including opposition from other political parties.

The year 1987 marked another milestone when the Federal Government directed that all states of the Federation including the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) should establish Adult and Non-Formal Education Agencies to executive literacy education. It is on record that Kano State was the first to comply in 1980. With such agencies prosecuting literacy in the states and local governments, the Federal (Military) Government went ahead to promulgate the National Primary Education Commission (1993) to take care of basic literacy in the formal education system; the Nomadic Education Commission (1989) to take care of basic education of children of nomads and migrants; and the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NCMANE) on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1990 by Decree No. 17 of that year and inaugurated in 1991 to eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria. Still to showcase its determination to eradicate illiteracy in the country, Nigeria in 1990 joined a broad alliance of Governments, United Nations, donor agencies, and NGOs that met in Jomtien, Thailand to launch the global challenge of education for ALL by the year 2000, and was signatory to the Jomtien Declaration. Also the adoption of the "Each-one-teach-one" or "fund the teaching of one" approach enunciated by the then Minister of Education, Professor Babs Fafunwa was further indication that Nigeria was committed to the success of mass literacy education.

The fact remains that the National Mass Literacy Campaign was re-launched on 8<sup>th</sup> September, 1992 by the Babangida administration which declared 1990-2000 another literacy decade, through the introduction of Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Reforms (MAMSER), the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) and similar organizations. Although elaborate preparations were made, including

external assistance from donor agencies particularly the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), success was limited. Sarumi (2005) pinpointed political crisis, frequent changes in government, lack of continuity in personnel and lack of commitment by the end users of literacy as key factors that militated against the success of 1990-2000 mass literacy period.

The aforementioned antecedents in mass literacy efforts do not mean that there were no success stories. Though according to Omolewa (1997) there were no indicators to measure the successes; Indabawa (1992) attested to the fact that in some areas many people became literate. For example, at the end of the first FGN/UNDP assisted mass literacy period, 1995-1998, NCMANE reported that about 3.1 million illiterate Nigerians became literate. Yet, the fact remains that most of those campaigns were unsuccessful, hence Nigeria is still bearing a heavy illiteracy burden.

### **3. Implications / Lessons from Adult Education Historical Research**

Obviously Nigeria has entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century with an army of illiterates as evidenced by the 2008 Global Monitoring Report which give the most recent data on Nigerian adult literacy rate as 69% with 31% as illiterates. This situation behooves us to look at our past and draw lessons that will help to sharpen our present and future efforts in mass education of our people for development. The present trend in mass literacy campaign whereby the universities in collaboration with NGOs and international organizations promote literacy acquisition is quite contrary to the position held by Major A.J. Carpenter of old that the universities did not have a role to play in literacy promotion (Omolewa, 1981). The implication of this for mass education efforts in Nigeria is that there is the dire need for a shared vision and mass involvement of all and sundry in the promotion of literacy education for holistic and faster results.

There is also the need to find lasting solution to the ineffectiveness of most of the agencies responsible for mass education such as MAMSER which later metamorphosed into the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI) as well as the various initiatives of the NGOs and quasi-government institutions such as the former Family Support Programme (FSP) and Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW). Such constraints arising from political and ideological differences, economic difficulties, frequent changes in government and lack of continuity in personnel and policies which contributed to their failures need to be well addressed if Nigeria is to succeed in its present and future bid to rid the country of illiteracy disease.

Various methods should be put into practice by all adult literacy facilitators irrespective of their sponsors. In this stance, Okediran (1998) warned that we should stop pretending that we are employing an innovative method of approach in teaching the literacy classes, whereas we are not. According to him, such a pretence is like the proverbial ostrich which buries its head in the sand, and believes people do not see it. In fact much achievement in literacy education for Nigeria hinges on the methodology such as “Each-one-Teach-one” or “Fund-the-Teaching-of-One”, African Frerian Laubach Approach (AFRELLA), Participatory Learning and Action Approach (PLA), and popular participation of the people approach etc.

According to Omolewa (1981), frustration as we are now recoding in mass education efforts is a constraint to mass literacy promotion in Nigeria, even during the colonial era. According to him, this was how Major A.J. Carpenter was frustrated out of the literacy section in April 1952 because some of his colleagues did not reason along with him in promoting adult literacy education. In fact, Omolewa (1981) added that this sad development led to some other committed adult educators like Alhaji Kumasi, finding their way out of the adult literacy sector of the country’s education scheme to take up posts where the attainment of independence required their services. Sarumi (2005) revealed that the same thing is still happening today as a result of political, ethnic, religious, individual differences, and many other social vices plaguing our country. As a way forward, Nigerians have to forget all these indices of division if we are to educate the teeming population of Nigeria.

Looking back into history, Nigeria needs to learn some lessons from the pool of knowledge and experiences of some African leaders in the area of literacy education in their countries. The exemplary life of Julius Nyerere, the ex-president of Tanzania in literacy promotion and the concept of self-reliance based on “Ujama” need to be imbibed. Again, the energetic Cuban leader, Fidel Castro, who declared at the United Nations that he would give illiteracy a running battle also deserves appreciation. To match his words with action, Castro closed all the Universities for eight months so that the students could join in the war against illiteracy. This, to say the least, is the direction that Nigeria can also look into.

Another lesson is the need for sincerity of purpose on the part of our leaders so that the followers can be supportive of government programmes aimed at eradicating illiteracy in the country. Therefore, personal interest, and personal clashes, manipulations of literacy funds, opportunism, ethnicity, religious fanaticism/intolerance and so on, must be sincerely discouraged. It is when all these shortcomings and others, which militated against

government mass literacy efforts in the past are eradicated that the country can start to think about building bridges across the universities, NGOs, mass media, governments, religious organizations, political parties, and other stakeholders in mass literacy education.

#### 4. Conclusion

The past Government mass literacy education efforts in Nigeria have not produced the desired results hence the country has entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century with an army of illiterates. The efforts failed because they were designed and executed by few people in the corridors of power or in some cases, by international organizations with a lot of faulty strategies. The need arises now for us to draw lessons from the past so as to improve the country's future design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and sustainability of the nation's mass education efforts aimed at reducing illiteracy rate to the barest minimum level.

#### 5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby proffered:

1. With still over twenty two (22) million illiterates, Nigeria has no choice than to review its defective basic education Act of 2004 if we are to move closer to achieving some of the goals of Education for ALL (EFA) and those of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and even our own home-grown NEEDS as well as (SEEDS).
2. Nigeria should cling to the UNESCO's Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) which tries to ascertain from the people what their developmental needs are before taking action to assist them improve their lot.
3. Further efforts in mass literacy should include the people themselves in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation including mobilization of the people towards popular participation.
4. The Federal Government should make and enforce reasonable policies backed with fund as well as summon up strong political/national will to reduce the shameful level of illiteracy rate in the country.
5. The Federal Government should equally take a decisive action against the lingering illiteracy burden in the country. It is suggested that instead of closing tertiary institutions to allow students participate in the crusade against illiteracy, the National Youth Corps members should be mobilized to give this resistant monster a running battle.
6. Training and retraining of literacy facilitators in the application of innovative approaches to literacy promotion such as the Real Literacy Material Approach (RLM) and the "each-one-teach-one" or "fund the teaching of one" approach, etc. is fundamental and inevitable if we are to succeed in getting rid of illiteracy.
7. State chief executives and Local Government Chairmen should be constrained to attach serious concern to execution of mass literacy programmes in rural areas of the country where most of the illiterate adults reside, as well as provide fund to enable the Agencies for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education in the states function effectively.
8. The Federal Government should as a matter of urgency set the machinery in motion to institute another mass literacy campaign that will be effectively carried out.

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