

## PROMOTING LITERACIES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY IN NIGERIA: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

Dr. BALA ZAKARI AND MURTALA AKANBI YUSUF

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### Abstract

*The efforts of promoting literacies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria can only be fruitful if some factors such as funding, policy, training of adult educators, public enlightenment and institutional support are addressed. The paper traces the evolvement of literacy as well as the 21<sup>st</sup> century literates. The paper also proposes the relevant literacy programmes for meeting the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs of adults and youth in Nigeria. The essential considerations such as funding, policy issues, public enlightenment, training of adult educators and institutional support on how best to promote literacies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria were raised and discussed.*

### Introduction

It is believed that the illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be only those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn. This assertion means that the literate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be such a person who sees learning as a continuous exercise. Literacy in this sense is a foundation for lifelong learning. Literacy is the most basic currency of the knowledge economy we are living in today.

The term literacy has been used in its plural form as literacies. This usage is premised on two understandings. There are those who look at the concept of literacies from language point of view while others view it from the variety of needs that literacy has to satisfy in preparing youth and adults of today for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In line with the view that literacy must reflect the ever dynamic needs of youth and adults the concept of literacy is evolved overtime. For example, international community and national government, Nigeria inclusive have recognized the need for developing variety of literacies in response to immediate and ever changing needs of youth and adults which UNESCO has championed since the mid of the 20th century to the present time (Zakari & Yusuf, in Press).

In fact, the need for the changes in the concept of literacy is to ensure that the literacy programmes provided reflect meeting the dynamic needs of people as they emerge. This might be the reason why the year 2013 World Literacy Day had its theme as “Literacies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. As laudable as the theme of the 2013 World Literacy Day was, the questions that may come to one’s mind are how can Nigeria promote literacies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How can we get there? What are the matters arising? Attempts are made in this paper to answer these questions.

### Evolution of the Concept of Literacy

In 1950s when UNESCO was established, literacy was seen predominantly as the skills of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic – the so-called three Rs. Promoting literacy was a matter of enabling individuals to acquire the skills of decoding and encoding language in written form. Thus literacy’s role at that time was to enable as many people as possible to be initiated into reading and writing culture with an emphasis on reading.

It is, however, important to note that literacy goes beyond activities designed to teach adults to read and write simple sentences. This is because such restricted skills are of little utility (Titmus, 1989). In the 1960s UNESCO moved from 3Rs to a functional view of literacy. Functional literacy was promoted as a response to economic demand with a focus on the Reading and Writing skills required to increase productivity, be it in Agriculture, Manufacturing or other jobs; it was often linked to vocational training.

UNESCO (1978) made a frantic effort to distinguish between Literacy and Functional Literacy. According to UNESCO, a person is literate when he can, with understanding, read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life, whereas an individual who is functionally literate is able to “engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community’s development” (Sheesh, 2009:5).

The global trend on literacy shifted to consciousness raising in 1970s through Literacy for conscientization championed by the Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire. This scholar sees literacy as an instrument of consciousness among people. Literacy in this sense encourages people to ask questions and bolster action for change. This kind of literacy is called ideological literacy whose focus is to encourage people to be in charge of their lives.

The focus of literacy in 1980s was on Mass Literacy. The focus was to provide literacy opportunities for large number of people. Governments of developing nations, including Nigeria launched Mass Literacy Campaigns to reach out to large number of adults with the skills of reading, writing and numeracy with the view to reducing high illiteracy rate among adult population. For example in Nigeria, the Federal Government launched a 10-year Mass Literacy Campaign to reach 55 million adults within 10 years between 1982 and 1992. The influence of this effort is still observable today.

During 1990s and 2000s the literacy got broader aspects. The emphasis was that literacy was always embedding in other social realities such as: work, family, religion and relationships with the state. It was in this period that literacy was seen as one of the core goals of the Education for All (EFA) programme and without literacy it is not possible to achieve the EFA goal.

The United Nations (UN) Literacy Decade (2003-2012) was also noticeable in the early 2000s. This initiative recognized literacy as a human right and drew the attention that a significant proportion of the world population was still far away from achieving this right. Thus, UNESCO (2006) stated that- Literacy is;

- i. a right still denied to nearly a fifth of the world’s adult population;
- ii. essential to achieve each of the EFA goals;
- iii. a societal and an individual phenomenon, with attention needed to both dimensions;
- iv. crucial for economic, social and political participation and development, especially in today’s knowledge societies; and
- v. key to enhancing human capabilities, with wide ranging benefits including critical thinking, improved health and family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, children’s education, poverty reduction and active citizenship.

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The above narrations and initiatives show that in today's world, being literate requires much, much more than the traditional literacy of yesterday of having the ability to read, write and do simple calculation. This leads to who are the twenty-first century literates?

### **Who are the Twenty-First Century Literates?**

Prior to the 21st century, literacy defined as a person's ability to read and write, separating the educated from the uneducated. With the advent of a new millennium and the rapidity with which technology has changed society, the concept of literacy has assumed new meanings. It is important to note that the current generation of teenagers, sometimes referred to as the E-Generation should possess digital competencies to effectively navigate the multidimensional and fast-paced digital environment. For generations of adults who grew up in a world of books, travelling through cyberspace seems as treacherous and intimidating as speaking a new language. However, it should be noted that, all literate people are educated but not all educated people are literate.

In relation to the above, adults of the twenty-first century are faced with a number of challenges which must be attended to. These challenges include unemployment, poverty, corruption, insecurity and political marginalisation among others. Therefore, the twenty-first century literates need to:

- gain proficiency with tools of technology (how to apply talents to improve business or commercial transactions, use numeracy skill to communicate with outside world);
- develop relationships with others, confront and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally;
- design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes (engage in learning some major foreign languages such as Chinese, Japanese, French and others);
- 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;
- solve poverty and unemployment problem;
- fight corruption and corrupt people;
- participate actively in political scene; and
- manage peace and resolve conflicts (UNESCO, 2006).

It is difficult to limit our list of challenges facing adults, but as professionals in adult education and stakeholders in serving the under-served we must refocus our literacy programmes to meet these challenges to enable adults and youths cope with the challenges of the twenty-first century. In this regard we shall consider what literacies should we focus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Literacy Programmes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should focus on the following programmes to meet the global challenges of adults and youths, especially in developing countries like Nigeria:

- **Digital Literacy**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized with technological advancement. This is more pronounced in the area of communication technology. The use of computer with internet facilities is the order of the day. Anybody who is not computer literate would not be able to enjoy the goodies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more especially in the trading activities. Business men and women communicate through internet and exchange samples of goods, such as cars, and shoes and kitchen utensils. In our societies today people use (manipulate) mobile phones regardless of their ability to read or write. This will be enhanced if they are made literate and promote confidence in the users. This therefore requires that literacy agencies should include digital literacy in their programmes to enable adults and youths acquire computer and internet skills for effective and efficient communication.

- **Entrepreneurial Literacy**

Poverty and unemployment are at high rate in developing countries, Nigeria inclusive. There is evidence that many youths and adults who are graduates of our higher institutions of learning are roaming about Nigerian streets looking for unavailable jobs. This scenario has increased the rate of poverty, among general population. The poor that have no skills at all are also wallowing in poverty especially the rural dwellers. Certainly, Entrepreneurial Literacy will go a long way to equip people with economic skills that could help them fetch for themselves instead of waiting for succour from where it may not forth come. This form of literacy certainly promotes human resource development through empowerment and life skill acquisition (it is worthy to note that many state governments especially Kano State has come up with many human empowerment initiatives for the youth and adults).

- **Health Literacy**

Among the health literacies for Nigerian societies are Community Education talk given in health centres, Radio broadcasts on health matters, community sensitization campaigns, Text Messages, Newspaper articles on health and one-on-one health tips. In spite of all these, Nigeria is faced with a lot of health problems. The common health challenges in Nigeria are on how to control the common diseases such as malaria, child and maternal health and HIV/AIDS. These diseases have claimed large number of people's lives across communities. For Nigerian adults and youths to enjoy the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they must be helped out of these health challenges. Health literacy in this regard can go a long way to inform and educate people how to take preventive measures and immediate curative measures of diseases to mitigate the effects on their lives (Zakari, 2001).

- **Literacy for Conscientization**

The high level of illiteracy in Nigeria is mainly responsible for the problems of political apathy, ignorance, diseases, partition, poverty, insecurity, among others. Parents need to be conscientized in order for them to recognize the need for them to send their children to

school. This will certainly help to fight illiteracy from the grass root. However, it is good to note that the common challenge of literacy promotion in Nigeria is the relationship between population of school age children and the percentage of the children currently attending schools. This, in addition, facilitates other social problems, hence achievements in many other sectors of human life become difficult. In view of the foregoing most governments have come to realize the need for literacy as a way of tackling the problems rooted in illiteracy (Zakari, 1999). The need to emphasise consciousness raising among Nigerian adults and youths is obvious. This is accentuated in the way and manner people do politics in Nigeria- the politics of do or die affairs; money politicking; etc. Obviously, this scenario calls for consciousness raising among adults and youths for them to challenge the status-quo and attain a truly democratic Nigerian society. Literacy for conscientization is relevant in this situation as it is capable of encouraging people to ask questions and bolster action for change. Indeed, the current democratic practice in Nigeria and other African countries has helped in making people to be more aware and prompt in their actions. The levels of performance of voters in the 2011 elections have shown how people are more aware and conscious of their voting right and the outcome of elections.

- **Budget Literacy**

This programme is aimed at mobilising people to involve themselves in the process and implementation of the public budget prepared by the government at all levels. Ordinarily, budget of any government must reflect the needs and aspirations of the people the budget is meant for. This can only be possible where people are involved in its preparation and implementation. Budget literacy teaches skills and knowledge on the roles of public, especially the electorates in budgeting process. Through budget literacy Nigerians can hold the public office holders accountable on allocation, custody and use of the state resources. When public becomes aware and critics of budgets, public office holders will be conscious of their actions in the process and implementations of public budget (Zakari & Yusuf, in Press).

- **Human Right Literacy**

The effort of promoting literacy in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should embrace human right literacy where people are encouraged to respect the right of individuals. Through human right literacy Nigerian individuals will be equipped with the right of other fellow Nigerians and the need to respect them. A culture of respect for human rights is crucial to permanent peace.

- **Tolerance Literacy**

As social animals, human beings behave and reason differently. In fact we cannot expect everyone in Nigeria to believe in the same God and worship same way and reason or doing things the same way. Our differences on the basis of belief systems, tribes, ideologies, religions among others must be tolerated and respected. Understanding and appreciating other peoples' belief systems and religious practices should constitute part of the components of tolerance literacy programme (Yusuf & Mayanchi, 2012) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria. This type of literacy should also preach endurance and forgiveness to the learners. Adult learners should be made to understand that they are bound to offend one another and this necessitates that human beings need to be tolerant and learn to forgive if social harmony and peaceful coexistence are to be attained in Nigeria 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Having examined some of the priorities of literacies in 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria, it is imperative to discuss the realities on ground as far as our preparation to deliver is concerned. This will lead us to some considerations in promoting literacies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria.

### **Some Considerations in Promoting Literacies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Nigeria**

There is no doubt that for Nigeria to meet up in its bid to promote literacies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the following issues must be religiously addressed.

#### **Funding**

Funding education in Nigeria has remained one of the most frequent discourses by educators and policy makers in. In fact, the issue of funding has led to shut down of the Nigerian universities for almost six months in 2013 as Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) embarked on an indefinite, total and comprehensive strike to protest against the Federal government not implementing the agreement signed by the two parties in 2009. The financing of adult literacy education is far from satisfactory. It is quite apparent that Nigeria is yet to match her intention of placing literacy on a higher pedestal with the actual budgetary allocation to that sub-sector. This, no doubt, constitutes a very big challenge in literacy promotion. There are evidences that government in Nigeria at the Federal, State and Local government levels does not provide expected funds required for functional formal and non-formal education for Nigerians. For example, between 2004 and 2012 the budgetary allocations to education in Nigeria were between 4.83% and 9.15% (Okogu, 2011) when UNESCO recommended that countries should devote not less than 26% of their annual budget to education.

Incontestably, promoting literacies for 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria requires adequate funding which should be mobilized from all stakeholders; government, private individuals, community groups, donor agencies, etc. It must be added that government needs to show serious commitment to funding literacies of different kinds as foundation for learning society if it is to secure other partners' supports. In this respect, one will suggest that adult educators and other stakeholders (National Commission for Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education, State Agencies for Mass Education, NGOs, etc) in non-formal education sector must pressurize government to respect non-formal education component of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme through allocating proper funds to it.

#### **Training of Adult Educators**

The nature and quality of training received currently by prospective adult educators at undergraduate and postgraduate levels must be reviewed in order to ensure that adult educators are up to the task in literacies planning, designing and delivery. Mpofu and Youngman (2004) found out that Anglophone Africa's adult educators' training programmes are made up of 14 percent practical work at the Bachelor level, 1 to 2 percent at the Masters level and 0 percent of practical work at the PhD level. If the training received by this calibre of adult educators is almost theoretical, then, meeting the needs for designing literacies for 21<sup>st</sup> century by them may be very difficult. It is very important to add that as students, teachers and researchers of adult and non-formal education in Nigeria experiences revealed that curriculum of adult education programme in Nigerian universities has not accorded serious importance to ICT in education. This

problem must be addressed if we are serious in our efforts to provide literacies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian. As a matter of urgency, Departments of Adult Education in Nigerian universities should include in their curriculum ICT and Adult Education in order to give their trainees ICT knowledge and its applications in meeting the needs of their clients. In addition, innovative skills and human potential development should be part of the focus of the curriculum.

At another level of literacy delivery, most of literacy instructors in Nigeria are not trained in the art and science of helping adults and underserved to learn. This is another problem which must be addressed if Nigeria will achieve its targets in promoting literacies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria. This scenario requires retraining opportunities for the instructors at regular interval for them to deliver.

### **Institutional Commitments**

The commitment of institutional structures put in place to manage adult and non-formal education programmes by Nigerian government at Federal and State levels has not been very encouraging. For example, National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education and State Agencies for Mass Education activities have been crippled by lack of adequate fund and political will. The State Agencies for Mass Education in Nigeria have been contending with lack of support from government which has made their efforts in promoting adult literacy in their domains very difficult. If not in few states like Kano where government shows commitment to promoting adult literacy, many States in Nigeria pay a lip service to adult literacy development.

Certainly, with the current state of the institutions charged with the responsibility of providing literacy programmes for adults, meeting the target of promoting literacies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria is unrealistic. This is because the commitments required to deliver literacies in the century are enormous. This time, the agencies need more skilled and competent hands that understand the socio-economic, cultural, political and technological conditions of adults and use them to design, plan and deliver appropriate literacies. By implication, the Agencies need more support from governments, individuals and donor organisations for them to train and retrain their staff and recruit competent hands for the work. Computer literacy training is also important for the staff of the Agencies to enable them develop the relevant skills for effective literacy services delivery. The Agencies also need to commission researches with a view to understanding social conditions of Nigerian 21<sup>st</sup> century for better service delivery. In addition, varieties of methods of literacies delivery, such as Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT), Each One Teach One (EOTO), functional approach among others, should be explored and used for literacies delivery. These methods have potentials for effective literacy delivery.

### **Advocacy for Public Enlightenment**

It is important to note that public enlightenment is necessary, first to secure public support in promoting literacies for 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria in terms of the public to realize that everybody, irrespective of level of education, requires one form of literacy or the other to survive in the ever-changing society. The advocacy should be taken to every nook and cranny of the country by the Agencies of Mass Education and other institutions of adult and non-formal education. In fact, Departments of Adult Education in Nigerian

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Universities and Colleges of Education have a lot to do in terms of championing advocacy for soliciting for public support to participate in different literacy programmes designed to better their lots. Information dissemination is very important in convincing people why they have to be part of literacy as learners either personally or through group participation.

### **Policy Support**

The commitment of any government in developmental effort, such literacy promotion, is best assessed through the policy support. Already in Nigeria the National Policy on Education has emphasised the importance of literacy on one hand and education on the other as a best instrument for sustainable development. The National Policy on Education (2013) describes mass literacy, adult and non-formal education as the equivalent of basic education given to adults, children and youth of formal school age outside the formal school system. The aims as specified in the policy are to provide functional education for adults and youth who have never had the advantage of formal education or who left school too early. The target groups include migrant communities/people, *almajiris*, illiterate and semi-literate adults, youth and adolescents. It includes persons who left the formal school system early and are now willing to come back and continue schooling. It accommodates other categories of disadvantaged groups who are unable to have access to the conventional education system and therefore require other forms of educational programmes to cater for their peculiar needs and circumstances (FRN, 2013).

But unfortunately, as beautifully as the policy is, the government has been paying lip services to its implementation. Certainly, this situation cannot take us to anywhere in attaining literacy for all especially promoting literacies for 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria. This therefore requires that implementation of the policy must be emphasized. Specifically, implementation of policy on literacy must be advocated for by adult education stakeholders for government to popularize literacies for all in the country.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria requires that literacy must go beyond acquisition of skills of reading, writing and numeracy to embrace computer appreciation; healthy living, consciousness raising, budgeting literacy, human right respect, tolerance for peaceful co-existence, environmental protection, entrepreneurial skills, among others. When the 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy efforts are directed to address the above challenges, adults and youths in Nigeria will smile in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and become more productive for national development.

For the above to happen, the literacy stakeholders (Adult Educators, Agencies for Mass Education, Governments, Private Organizations, NGOs, Literacy instructors and Facilitators, Donor Agencies must play their roles individually and collectively in addressing the issues of finance; training of adult educators, institutional support, policy support and public enlightenment in order to make literacies relevant to meeting the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges of Nigeria.

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