

**LITERACY FOR
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
IN A KNOWLEDGE
ECONOMY**

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Strategies for Promoting Democracy and Good Governance through Adult Literacy Programmes in Nigeria

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Introduction

The Nigerian society is characterized by dilapidated infrastructure, mass poverty, unemployment, decreasing standard of living, socioeconomic inequality, and insecurity, among others. To improve the system requires the active participation of all, especially the adult population. The active participation of people in governance is premised on the literacy level of the people. Where people are largely illiterate, they are inactive participants in the democratic processes of their community. Thus, the impact of adult literacy on political empowerment cannot be overemphasized. It is against this background that this paper explores various adult literacy programmes as strategies for engendering ideal democratic structures and good governance in Nigeria. It concluded that adult literacy programmes (literacy for conscientization, as well as civic, budget and leadership literacy) can be used to install ideal democracy and good governance in Nigeria.

The last quarter of the 20th century witnessed the greatest expansion of democracy in history. In Nigeria today, democracy is gradually taking root, after many years of military dictatorship. On 29 May 1999, a democratically-elected government was sworn in, marking a return to democracy after its suspension in 1983. The Nigerian democracy is therefore nascent.

Democracy embodies a set of political ideas that detail the best possible form of social organization (Abdellatif, 2003). To be a democrat is to have faith in people, to believe that people have inalienable rights to make decisions for themselves, and to be committed to the notion that all people are equal in some fundamental and essential way. Based on this, democracy is identified as the ideal civilized and refined form of governance (Abiola and Olaopa, 2006). Its features have been identified by Abdellatif (2003:10) as:

1. People's human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected;
2. People can hold decision-makers accountable;
3. People are free from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, gender or any other attribute;
4. The needs of future generations are reflected in current policies; and
5. Economic and social policies are responsive to people's needs and aspirations.

The above features portray democracy as an ideal form of governance for any nation. The challenge for all societies is to create a system of governance that promotes, supports and sustains human development, especially for the poorest and marginalized. Governance is the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It entails the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences.

Governance is considered to be good if it is participatory, transparent and accountable, as well as being effective and equitable in promoting the rule of law. Good governance ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poor and vulnerable are heard in decision-making, especially over the allocation of development resources.

The active participation of people in governance is premised on their literacy level. Where people lack literacy, they become inactive participants in democratic processes. The connection between literacy and political engagement is predicated on the assumption that as individuals become more exposed to information about their environment, especially on public institutions and government, they become more prepared to make such bodies more responsive to their needs. There is the expectation also that as individuals are engaged in political decisions about different aspects of life, an intimate connection develops

between such exposure and participation in democratic processes. Indeed, in modern times, there is a connection between entering formal relations with government and non-government institutions and literacy, especially in the area of print communication. Thus, there is the need to prioritize literacy – defined as individual access to reading and writing – as an inescapable preposition.

Indeed, the worries of Nigerians are not so much about the nascence of the nation's democracy as they are on how the system can operate in a manner that delivers and sustains the dividends of democracy. Attaining an ideal democratic society and good governance requires that the adult population of the country attains a reasonable level of literacy skills; this would help them champion the cause of good governance. By implication, adult literacy has vital roles to play in the pursuit of a sustainable democratic society and good governance in Nigeria. Thus, this paper explores the various relevant adult literacy programmes for engendering democratic and good governance in Nigeria. Ideal democratic and good governance, as well as features of the present Nigerian democracy are examined.

Ideal Democratic and Good Governance

The concept of democracy can be seen from commonly accepted principles, such as freedom, equity, justice and sustainability. Democracy is understood as a system of government through elected representatives. Hence, democratic governance is that which promotes human development, seeks efficient institutions, and a predictable economic and political environment necessary for economic growth and effective functioning of public services (Abdellatif, 2003). According to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report (2002):

The concept of democratic governance is concerned with political freedom and human rights, and removal of discrimination as central objectives, so that the system can be built on institutions and rules that are not just efficient but also fair, and that are developed through a democratic process in which everybody has a real political voice.

Ogundiya (2010) argued that governance means the manner in which power is exercised by governments in managing and distributing social and economic resources. The nature and manner by which a government manages and

distributes these social and economic resources are what make a government a bad or a good one. Thus, when resources are distributed to promote inequality or to achieve personal or group ambitions, the essence of governance (which coincides with the essence of politics and essence of the state) is defeated. Consequently, the UNDP (1997) stated that good governance is the commitment and capability to effectively address the allocation and management of resources to respond to collective challenges. Nine core characteristics of good governance, according to UNDP (1997), are:

1. **Participation** - All men and women should have a voice in decision-making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their interests. Such broad participation is built on freedom of association and speech, as well as the capacity to participate constructively.
2. **Rule of law** - Legal frameworks should be fair and enforced impartially, particularly the laws on human rights.
3. **Transparency** - Transparency is built on the free flow of information. Processes, institutions and information are directly accessible to those concerned with them, and enough information is provided to understand and monitor them.
4. **Responsiveness** - Institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders.
5. **Consensus orientation** - Good governance mediates differing interests to reach a broad consensus on what is in the best interests of the group and, where possible, on policies and procedures.
6. **Equity** - All men and women have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being.
7. **Effectiveness and efficiency** - Processes and institutions produce results that meet needs while making the best use of resources.
8. **Accountability** - Decision-makers in government, the private sector and civil society organizations are accountable to the public, as well as to institutional stakeholders. Accountability levels differ, depending on the organization and whether the decision is internal or external to an organization.
9. **Strategic vision** - Leaders and the public have a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development. There is also an understanding of the historical, cultural and social complexities in which that perspective is grounded.

These core characteristics represent the ideal – and no society has them all. Even so, it is believed that all societies should aim and strive towards achieving this ideal system. In contrast, the World Bank (1992) remarked that bad governance has many features, among which are: failure to make a clear separation between what is public and what is private, hence a tendency to divert public resources for private gains; failure to establish a predictable framework for law and government behaviour in a manner that is conducive to development; arbitrariness in the application of rules and laws; excessive rules, regulations, licensing requirements, etc, which impede the functioning of markets and encourage rent-seeking; priorities that are inconsistent with development, thus, resulting in misallocation of resources; and excessively narrow base for, or non-transparency in, decision-making.

Ogundiya (2010: 204) emphasized that good governance is about the performance capacity of government or its agencies to provide exemplary leadership. Failure of governance could expressly mean failure of leadership. Indeed, the best governors are those who meet their societies in conditions of social and political nadir and are able to lift them up to a position of prosperity. By implication, the attainment or otherwise of good governance depends on the kind of leadership provided in a state. Hence, how do we qualify the status of Nigeria's democracy and governance in the light of the characteristics of ideal democracy and good governance outlined above?

Status of Nigerian Democracy and Governance

Nigeria is today faced with numerous political and economic challenges, which portray its governance as unsatisfactory. This is evident in the high level of poverty, squalor and hunger among the majority of Nigerians. The hope of millions of Nigerians that democracy would engender a better life has remained unfulfilled. The general opinion is that democracy as is currently practised in Nigeria has produced unpalatable results. This perception is based on the nature of the Nigerian state and the character of its elite (Ogundiya, 2010: 205) which is generally described as unsatisfactory. In fact, some scholars (Toyo, 1994; Nwigwe, 2003; Ogundiya, 2010) do not see Nigeria as a democratic country, because of the poor way and manner in which the politicians conduct themselves. Nigerians have not significantly reaped the dividends of democracy in terms of outcome.

To further examine governance in Nigeria, there are fundamental issues of poverty, inequality, illiteracy, poor road networks, epileptic power supply, and unemployment, among others, which have direct impact on the people. Good democratic governance has the capacity to provide lasting solutions to these challenges; and here lies the truth of whether Nigeria has good or bad governance. Unfortunately, the Nigerian democracy has not been able to bring these dividends to the people. This is clearly evident in the debilitating state of infrastructure, mass poverty, high unemployment rate, decreasing standard of living, socioeconomic inequality, and many other problems confronting the Nigerian state, especially insecurity.

Responsiveness to the call of the masses is also considered an important feature of good governance. Unfortunately, this is also lacking in the Nigerian democracy. The poor response of the federal government to the January 2012 nationwide protest on petroleum subsidy removal is a testimony to the kind of democratic institution we have the country. That incident showed the insincerity of the leadership class.

Nigerian democracy is also characterized by corruption, ranging from acceptance of money or other rewards for awarding contracts, violation of procedures to advance personal interest, diversion of public resources, and other illegal and unconstitutional activities. This is misuse of authority.

The problem of low voters' education is also a feature of the Nigerian democracy. Politicians and government agencies such as the National Orientation Agency and the Independent National Electoral Commission have not taken voters' education seriously. This has further threatened electoral processes and encouraged political apathy and waste of ballot papers during elections, as many illiterate people, especially in rural areas, do not know how to handle ballot papers correctly. This problem is not unconnected with the high level of adult illiteracy in Nigeria, especially among the rural populace. Certainly, democracy and good governance cannot thrive in a society where a large portion of the adult populace is illiterate.

Accountability is also lacking in governance in Nigeria. Those at the helm of affairs are expected to give account of their stewardship to the people they govern. One of the best ways to show accountability in democracy is through a transparent budgeting system. Budgeting is the art and science of balancing competing demands for the scarce resources. It is expected to be a reflection of government's policy, priorities, planning and implementation process for delivery

of goods and services to improve the well-being of the citizenry. The present level of infrastructural and economic development in Nigeria cannot be said to be in consonance with the acclaimed level of budget performance at all tiers of government. Governments at all levels claim that available resources have been utilized to improve the well-being of the people, while in reality no improvement is seen or felt by the citizenry.

More so, it seems that many Nigerians, especially those at the grassroots level, do not know that they have to be involved in the budgeting process and its implementation. This lapse might not be unconnected with the absence of budget literacy in Nigeria. In a country where good governance is well enshrined, the government is held accountable by the people on allocation and use of state resources.

Therefore, Nigerians, including those in the adult education sector are concerned about why Nigerian democracy has failed to deliver good governance and what can be done to engender democratic and good governance in the country. In view of this, some relevant adult literacy programmes are examined with the view of engendering democratic and good governance.

Adult Literacy Programmes for Engendering Democratic and Good Governance in Nigeria

Adult literacy is said to be essential for people seeking to take part in public life (Bown, 2009). UNESCO (1997) described literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his goals, develop his knowledge base and potential, and participate fully in the wider society. Bown (2009) added that literacy is not a state but a process and that there are many types of literacy, depending on the learners' contexts, whether in the home, local community, market, workplace, religious institution, or in local, regional or national polity.

Some adult literacy programmes focus on the development of citizenship and autonomous attitudes in adult learners. These programmes are usually based on the consciousness-raising and dialogical approaches pioneered by Paulo Freire. Literacy of this kind helps the individual to develop a spirit of questioning and challenging existing theories of life. This feature of literacy further portrays it as a competent educational programme that could help to address the multifaceted problems facing Nigeria's nascent democracy. In essence it would help to achieve

good governance. In the light of the above, the following adult literacy programmes are examined for engendering democratic and good governance for Nigeria.

a. Literacy for conscientization

The low level of literacy in Nigeria is said to be mainly responsible for the prevalence of political apathy, ignorance, diseases, poverty, and insecurity, in the society. Globally, governments have come to realize that literacy is a potent tool for tackling these societal challenges. A strong programme for addressing these problems is literacy for conscientization, which Freire (1985) referred to as education/literacy for critical consciousness. The concept of literacy for conscientization was born out of the desire to ensure quality education that would be adapted to learners in a context of democracy and empowerment. The purpose is to empower the people to claim their rights, culture and civilization. It aims to make people the masters over their destiny. Thus, critical literacy enables people to become critical of what they see and hear, as well as what they are asked to give. In other words, they become critical of the social, political and economic relationships between the society and government. This type of literacy helps liberate the masses, the marginalized, the deprived and the voiceless. In conscientization literacy, the illiterate is led into a situation of intentional critical thinking, which Freire (1985: 85) affirmed would help them undertake rational and rigorous critiquing of the social, political and economic situations around them.

b. Civic literacy

Civic literacy can be broadly defined as the provision of information and learning experience to equip and empower citizens to participate in democratic processes (Rietbergen-McCracken, 2009). The overall goal of civic literacy is to promote civic engagement and support democratic and participatory governance. It is concerned with three different elements: civic knowledge, skills and disposition.

Civic knowledge refers to a citizen's understanding of the workings of the political system and of his own political and civic rights and responsibilities (e.g., the rights to freedom of expression and to vote and run for public office, and the responsibilities to respect the rule of law and the rights and interests of others).

Civic skills refer to a citizen's ability to analyse, evaluate, take and defend positions on public issues, and to participate in civic and political processes, such as monitor government performance or mobilize others around particular issues.

Civic dispositions are the citizen's traits, such as tolerance, public spiritedness, civility, critical-mindedness and willingness to listen, negotiate, and compromise, which are necessary for democratic thinking.

Civic literacy leads to increased participation in political processes, such as voting, taking part in communal problem-solving initiatives, attending local government meetings, participating in protests, contributing to election campaigns, and contacting elected officials.

c. Budget literacy

The aim of this programme is to mobilize people to involve themselves in the development and implementation of public budgets at all levels. Ordinarily, the budget of a government reflects the needs and aspirations of the populace, but this is only possible where people are involved in its preparation and implementation. Budget literacy teaches skills and knowledge on the roles of the public, especially the electorate, in the budgeting process. Through budget literacy, ordinary people can hold public office holders accountable on allocation, custody and use of state resources. When the public becomes aware and can, therefore, critique budgets, public officeholders will be conscious of their actions in the development and implementation of public budgets.

d. Leadership literacy

Leadership is a process whereby people intentionally influence, through communication, interrelationship and motivation, the behaviour of others in a specific group, for the attainment of organizational goals (Nwankwo, 1980, cited in Imhabekai, 2009: 57). Leadership is a trust given to the leader; hence, he must ensure that the trust is delivered such that organizational or communal goals are achieved. However, in Nigeria, many public officeholders abuse the trust given to them and use their offices to promote their personal interests to the detriment of the general public. This further threatens the possibility of attaining democratic and good governance in the country. The role of leadership orientation, as an adult literacy programme, is to instil the spirit of trust in those aspiring to leadership positions.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the path to attaining democratic and good governance in Nigeria lies in changing the orientation of both the leaders and the followers through relevant adult literacy programmes, as discussed in this paper. When the populace acquires the needed adult education (mainly in the forms of literacy for conscientization, as well as civic, budget and leadership literacy), democratic and good governance principles will be successfully implanted in the nation.

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