

THE IMPACT OF FUNCTIONAL LITERACY ON POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria, despite being blessed with both natural and human resources, is classified as one of the twenty poorest countries of the world. This is because a large percentage of her citizens live below poverty line. Hence, Nigeria remains a third world country despite being the giant of Africa. Past Nigerian governments have mounted different programs to alleviate poverty, yet the level of poverty in Nigeria remains significantly high. This paper therefore examines the impact of functional literacy on poverty alleviation in Nigeria. Functional literacy centers on skills needed to function adequately in society. This is achieved through education, and education is considered the principle means for developing human capacities. Through education, individuals and groups are equipped with the necessary skills and competencies that enable them to become more productive and self-reliant. This will in turn improve their living conditions and as well reduce poverty to the barest minimum level. This paper is hinged on the 'Capabilities Approach' by Amartya Sen, which is a perspective of the Human Development Theory.

Keywords: Functional Literacy, Poverty, Poverty Alleviation, Human Capacities and Human Development

Introduction

The quality of life of the average Nigerian citizen has progressively deteriorated. The income of a large percentage of the Nigerian work force cannot acquire their basic needs such as: proper meals, adequate health care, good living environment, basic education and so on. The fact that the minimum wage in Nigeria is still eighteen thousand naira (₦18,000) attests to this. The thirty thousand naira (₦30,000) minimum wage recently agreed upon has not been implemented. Judging by the rate the cost of living keep soaring on a daily basis, it is obvious that the minimum wage (whether the present or the recently approved) is grossly inadequate. It cannot purchase the basic needs of the people, neither for the individual nor for a household. Again, the incidence of unemployment in Nigeria is significantly high, thus aggravating the poverty situation. Despite the fact that Nigeria is blessed with both human and natural resources, majority of her citizens still wallow in abject poverty.

Past Nigerian governments mounted different programs in a bid to alleviate poverty such as: Operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Family Support Program(FSP), National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) and so on. Yet the living conditions of many Nigerians have not improved. This paper therefore examines the impact of functional literacy on poverty alleviation in Nigeria. It looks at the option of building human capabilities through functional literacy. Functional literacy is linked with human development which advocates creating an environment that will enable people, individually and collectively, to develop their full potentials and have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives.

Based on this backdrop the paper makes a distinction between basic literacy and functional literacy. It also x-rays what poverty is and how it can be alleviated through functional literacy. This paper is hinged on Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach, a perspective of human development theory.

Clarification of Concepts

Basic Literacy and Functional Literacy

The traditional notion of literacy is the ability to read and write. One of the early interpretations of a literate person is: one who can read with understanding and can write a short simple statement on his/her everyday

life. With time the meaning of literacy expanded to include numeracy skills in addition to the reading and writing skills.

Barton, 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 further expanded this by explaining that basic literacy is a form of learning to read and write (text and numbers) and developing these skills and using them effectively.

Today, literacy is no longer a monolithic concept, but one which has developed multiple facets. This is because of the changes, innovations, scientific and technological advancements that the human society has undergone. People began to argue whether 'reading, writing and arithmetic skills' are enough to qualify a person as literate in this ever-changing world. As a result, literacy today is used in a much wider and broader sense to refer to other skills and competencies necessary for an individual to function well in a modern world. We now talk about 'information literacy', 'computer literacy', 'financial literacy', 'media literacy', scientific literacy', 'graphic or mathematical literacy', 'visual literacy' and so on.

Experts at the UNESCO meeting defined literacy as "the ability to identify understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (Wiki. 3). They further averred that "literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potentials and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (Wiki. 7).

Again, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defined literacy as "the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potentials". (OECD, P. 59)

From the definitions above, we can see that literacy has gone beyond simply being able to read and write to being functionally literate in a somewhat more advanced and challenging environment. It is pertinent at this point to state that literacy at this level is tagged "**functional**".

The concept of '**functional literacy**' is based upon a wider content. It recognizes the dynamic nature of society and the need for constant efforts by the individual to adjust. It also recognizes the virtue of lifelong education since the requirement for the effective functioning within the society is constantly changing with new developments in science and technology. Hence, people need a combination of different forms of literacy to meet the demands of modern life.

Singh et al, assert (in their research report) that:

A person is considered as functional literate when ... he can improve his occupational status and enrich his leisure, when he has learnt to reflect on what he reads to make comparisons and draw his own conclusions, when he can contribute more effectively to civic and political life and can express opinions and demand his rights, when he no longer feels himself the pawn of others and when he begins to feel himself the master of his own fate (P.12-13).

The concept of functional literacy harmonizes acquisition of literacy with education. This means that a functional literate person will not only acquire basic literacy skills, he/she will also have a dynamic grip on knowledge and competencies which education offers, which are necessary for his smooth adjustment in a changing society.

Functional literacy focuses on effective role playing. It emphasizes the value of the equilibrium of society in which all elements have a role to play.

Diverse viewpoints have come up on the meaning of functional literacy stemming from different goals and orientations. Some border on economic development, productivity, social participation, continuing education (adult) and vocational training. For instance, the term functional literacy became aligned with ideas and educational practices that form part of the human resource model, which links literacy directly with economic development, individual prosperity and vocational achievement.

Similarly, the Ontario Adult Functional Literacy Framework developed in Canada, interprets 'functional' in terms of the measurement of competencies and vocational skills. Again, the UK Right to Read Campaign asserts the importance of access to literacy as an individual human right and a tool for social change.

Another viewpoint sees literacy as having knowledge and competence in a specific area. What this means is that a person can be functionally literate in a particular field, yet he/she is a '**functional illiterate**' in another field, that he/she has no knowledge or competence in. For instance, a Professor of language who has no

knowledge of computer is a functional illiterate in computer operations. In agreement with this viewpoint, Graff, defines functional literacy as:

The ability to read, write and calculate figures well enough to carry out activities that many people consider necessary to function in a society. Such activities as: reading newspaper, reading training manuals in the work place, understanding a high way map, road signs and balancing a cashbook (P. 2).

He further avers that anybody that has the basic literacy skills, but cannot perform the activities above, is labeled a “functional illiterate”.

A distinction is made between a “pure illiterate” and a “functional illiterate”. Of course, a pure illiterate cannot read or write, but a functional illiterate can read or write but does not possess enough skills and competencies to operate in a modern world. Therefore, a functional illiterate may be basically literate but not functionally literate.

The Concept of Poverty

Poverty is generally considered to be a measure of deprivation of the basic needs that a person, household or a community requires to have for a basic standard of living.

According to Mc Graw Hill, “poverty is a condition in which income is insufficient to meet substantial needs”. Thus, the level of living may be considerably lower than what is deemed to be adequate standard of living.

Oyemomi, states the views of the Central Bank of Nigeria (1991) on poverty as:

A state where an individual is not able to cater adequately for his basic needs of food, clothing and shelter; is unable to meet social and economic obligations, lacks gainful employment, skills, assets and self esteem; and has limited access to social and economic infrastructure such as, education, health, portable water and sanitation and consequently has limited chance of advancing his or her welfare to the limit of his or her capabilities. (16)

Again, the World Bank Team utilized inductive approach to uncover various dimensions of poverty and came up with diverse definitions of poverty. One of such definitions is “lack of what is necessary for material well-being, especially food, housing and other assets”. Another of such definitions is “lack of voice, power and independence that subjects them to exploitation”. Poverty makes them vulnerable to rudeness, humiliation and inhuman treatment from both private and public agents of the state under whom they seek help (Oyemomi, P. 17).

Those affected mostly are women, out-of-school children, drop-outs (youths and adults) rural people, ethnic and religious minorities.

Theoretical Framework

This work is hinged on Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach which he first articulated in the 1980s. This framework has been employed extensively in the context of human development.

Human development involves expanding the choices that people have, improving the human conditions so that people can have the chance to lead full lives. Fundamental to enabling these choices is building human capabilities. **Human capabilities are the range of things that people can do or be in life.** Here, the focus is on human investment. By investing in people, they are enabled to grow and empowered to pursue many different life paths.

The capabilities approach, challenges the mainstream concept of measuring development by economic growth. Sen argues that poverty, unfulfilled elementary needs, the occurrence of famines, the violation of political freedoms and neglect of the agency of women remain today despite an apparent growth in the economy. Though increase in poor people’s income contributes to the expansion of their freedom and can enhance their livelihood; to Sen, rise in income alone, cannot lift them out of poverty.

Sen’s approach focuses on human flourishing, as the entry point to the problem of poverty and global inequality. According to Sen, all human beings are equally entitled to enjoy a life that they value. He believes in equipping the individual with the necessary skills that would enable them to become the best they can be.

In capabilities approach 'poverty' is understood as deprivation in the capability to live a good life, and 'development' is understood as capability expansion. The focus of this approach is directly on the quality of life that individuals are actually able to achieve.

The focus of this paper is on poverty alleviation through functional literacy. It is about creating a platform through which the poor can be equipped with the skills and competencies that would lift them out of poverty. It is congruent with Amartya Sen's capability approach.

Poverty Alleviation Programs in Nigeria

Poverty alleviation refers to all the activities geared towards lowering the rate or prevalence of poverty in a country. It involves improving the living conditions of people who are already poor.

Technically, "poverty alleviation is a set of measures, both economic and humanitarian that are intended to permanently lift people out of poverty" (Web. n.p). They are ways of enabling the poor to create wealth for themselves as a means of ending poverty forever.

Past Nigerian governments, both military and civilian have come up with one form of poverty alleviation program or the other. Many of these programs have been articulated and executed over the years. Some of them include Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) 1978, Green Revolution (1982), the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) 1986, which ushered in deregulation of the economy and caused more hardship on the citizens. Others are the Directorate of Food Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), Better life for Rural Women, Family Support Program (FSP), National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) up to the Seven-Point Agenda of late President Umar Musa Yar'Adua. More recent schemes are: The provision of meals for primary school children, the micro credit plan aimed at supporting entrepreneurs, market women and artisans; and the N-Power program for unemployed graduates.

These lofty programs were aimed at improving the general well-being of Nigerians, give hope and succor to the poor, curb the menace of poverty and other developmental problems. Many of them were fraught with many problems at the implementation level. For instance, the last three schemes were implemented only in select regions and it is not completely clear how participants were chosen. The impact of the programs was just like a drop in the ocean, considering the current prevalence of poverty in the country today.

The Role of Functional Literacy and Language on Poverty Alleviation

Since all these laudable programs mentioned above could not achieve much, the pertinent question is - what is the way out? This paper posits that the answer lies in improving the literacy level of all the poor in our society. It advocates the option of building human capabilities through functional literacy. Human capabilities are the range of things that people can do or be in life. Functional literacy is linked with human development which propagates creating an environment that will enable people, individually and collectively, to develop their full potentials and have a reasonable chance to lead productive and creative lives.

Poverty is characterized by illiteracy. Out of the number of poverty stricken people, about 73% is concentrated in the rural areas where illiteracy is high (Oyemomi p.16). Illiteracy prevents the poor from improving their lives. Illiteracy creates a barrier to the assimilation of knowledge and new technologies that could help the poor live better lives. Illiterate people lose chances of employment because they have no employable skills. Even when they get employed their jobs are menial and low-paid. They have no voice. They are excluded in the development process. Literacy skills are therefore needed to enable the poor perform certain basic functions in a literate world.

Literacy is a process by which one expands one's knowledge of reading and writing in order to develop one's thinking and learning for the purpose of understanding oneself and the world. This process is fundamental to achieving competence in every educational subject. So, literacy is a necessary foundation for educational achievements (Gale, p. 1). These educational achievements and other competencies are required in addition to the literacy skills to become functionally literate to be able to operate successfully and become relevant in today's society.

Functional literacy can equip the poor with the necessary skills to operate in a modern world. They will have the ability to obtain and understand essential information, especially for those who intend to start small scale

businesses. They will be able to communicate, exchange information and link up with others via the new technologies available such as the mobile phone, WhatsApp, the internet and so on. They will have access to mobile banking. Through literacy, they will acquire employment skills that will enable them get better jobs with higher income that will better their livelihoods. Functional literacy will give them access to lifelong learning and professional development. With the new skills acquired, they will have voice and they will be able to participate meaningfully in their communities, as well as contribute to the national change and development.

Functional literacy for women will allow for reduced family size –an important poverty reduction event in its own right. It will also help in the nutritional component of the home. The women will be able to give their families balanced and nourishing food. Functional literacy will also help to sensitize them on health issues such as: HIV/AIDS or other STDs. They will also have access to micro-credit loans for small scale businesses.

In all these, the role of language should not be neglected. All forms of knowledge are transmitted and acquired through the vehicle of language. Literacy skills and other educational skills and competencies are taught through the vehicle of language. Suffice it to say that language is essential to both general education and literacy education.

To reach out to the poor and to ensure that their literacy education is successful, this paper suggests that the language of the environment of the targeted audience be used in educating them.

Conclusion

This paper has raised many fundamental issues. It is true that the skills of literacy enhance the acquisition of other educational subjects. It is also pertinent to note that the skills of basic literacy alone cannot qualify one as literate in this ever changing world. This explains the reason for functional literacy. One needs a combination of ‘multiple literacy’ to be relevant in this modern world. The poor in our society should be provided with a platform where they can acquire literacy education. In addition to this, they should be trained in vocational skills and be given soft loans that will enable them set up their own businesses.

Recommendations

For poverty alleviation in Nigeria, the following are recommended:

- Educational arrangement should be made to cater for all categories of the poor: out-of-school children, school drop-outs, rural people, adults and minority groups.
- Basic health care should be extended to the poor.
- Financial services should be made accessible to them through technology (such as mobile banking).
- Access to irrigation should be provided to the poor families. This will enable them to diversify their livelihood activities and potentially increase their incomes. They will be able to farm all year round without waiting for rain to fall to water their crops.
- They should be provided access to loan to start small scale businesses.
- Property rights should be extended to them especially the right to own a land.
- Apprenticeship in trades like plumbing, tailoring, hair dressing, electrical works, brick laying, auto-mechanics and so on; should be provided for the poor so that they can follow different paths of life as they deem fit.

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