

LITERACY AND THE REALIZATION OF THE MDGS IN RURAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

Literacy stands out as one of the foremost challenges that confront the realization of the Millennium Development Goals by the 2015 target. In line with Nigeria's commitments to the United Nations human rights instruments on education as in Education For All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, Goal 2) and the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD); the Federal Government of Nigeria promulgated policies/laws to enforce universal access to basic education with literacy as its cardinal objective. Consequently; the Federal Government of Nigeria established corresponding institutions for implementing the policies and initiated literacy programmes for the target populations at their various locations. Unfortunately; contrary to the anticipated educational outcome, access to basic education though improving, regional and gender differences are still significant. In addition quality, specifically; basic literacy skills of reading, writing and numeracy are not assured rather literacy rate in Nigeria has diminished remarkably. The challenges of the implementation of literacy programmes in rural communities of Nigeria are enormous and would likely persist. This fact informs the exigency for new pathways to literacy in rural Nigeria in view of the 2015 development goals target.

Keywords: Literacy, pathways, rural development

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2010 National Literacy Survey revealed that only 30.2% and 32.5% of the adult population were aware of the existence of any literacy programme and literacy centers respectively. Also, the adult literacy rates were 73.6% and 49.5% for urban and rural areas respectively.(National Literacy Survey,2010). EFA 2013 Report ranks Nigeria as one of the countries with the lowest literacy rate globally.(UNESCO,2013). According to the Minister for Education, Mr. Nyeson Wike; the number of adult illiterates in the country increased from 25million in 1997 to 35million in 2013 and over 10.5million children are out of school. (Nigeriamonitor, 2013). Most of these children are the urban poor, street and rural dwellers. In effect; Nigeria accounts for 4.5% of the world's adult illiterates of 775million. Available statistics show that 70% of Nigeria's estimated populations of one hundred and seventy million persons (170,000,000) live in rural areas and with 49.5% rural literacy rate as at 2010. This embarrassing status of literacy ridicules all past investments in education and literacy initiatives in Nigeria.

Literacy is the core of the six EFA goals (Jomtien, 1990) and was also acknowledged by the Millennium Summit (New York, 2000) as Goal 2 of the MDGs. The UNLD (2002-2012) was declared in realization of the synergy between literacy and development with the realization of the MDGs in view. Unfortunately the goals of the UNLD were not fully attained. Literacy challenges still persist globally. These challenges pose the greatest threat to the realization of MDGs.

The above scenario notwithstanding; literacy remains a distinct feature of all government developmental aspirations and policies in Nigeria; such as the Vision 20, 20:20 and National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), Nigeria's home grown development goals, the nexus of President Goodluck Jonathans transformation Agenda, and the most recent Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P).

Sequel to the above; this paper suggests that the new pathways to literacy should therefore explore the deployment of existing community institutions and the non formal systems .This could most likely guarantee

the participation of the rural dwellers because of the sense of ownership of the programme and inclusion which the previous strategies did not offer.

2. LITERACY: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The concept of literacy defies a precise definition. This is because of the evolving, plural and context specific notions of literacy that bestow multi-dimensional identity on it. This accounts for the many theories of literacy such as those from the socio-cultural perspectives such as the social practice and constructionist theories. Originally, literacy was limited to national languages, particularly in colonized nations like Nigeria. There was also a sharp divide between the literate and illiterate within such context that was determined by the ability to read and write in the official language of communication. The evolving nature of literacy consequent upon its uses in response to changes in the patterns of communication and the demands of employers of labour in this age of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and globalization have changed the perception of literacy. Instead of the divide between "literate and illiterate", researchers propose a continuum with different levels and types with ethnological considerations in view. This orientation informs the OECD's (2000) definition of literacy as a particular capacity and mode of behavior, ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, work and in community service to achieve information in daily activities, at home, work and in community service to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.

This definition situates literacy in the social practice theory in that it emphasizes the use and context of literacy. The United Nations Education and Cultural Organization (UNESCO,2005) presents a working definition of literacy that also stresses context and use as expressed by the Report of the Expert Meeting on Literacy. It states:

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, communicate and compute material using printed and written materials with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in her community and wider society.

In line with the social practice theory; this definition projects the use of literacy and its transformational potentials. The above definition strengthens the Persepolis Declaration (1975) that subscribes to the fact that "literacy is not an end in itself". It is an indispensable means of acquiring any form of education and requisite for basic education as a human right as sustained by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). This submission is very relevant in the interrogation of the synergy between literacy and the realization of Goal 2 of the MDGs, EFA (Jomtien, 1990) and Dakar goals. (2000).It is obvious that the deprivation of literacy jeopardizes the realization of other fundamental human rights. This justifies the conception of literacy as transformational. It bestows the necessary critical thinking skills and dispositions for active participation in the polity. Also the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) gave new impetus to the goal of universal literacy with the theme, "literacy is freedom". This connotes the transformational and empowering features and potentials of literacy. It takes literacy beyond the set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating

3. CONTEXT

Nigeria is made up of thirty six (36) states and the Federal Capital Territory situate in Abuja. For political expedience, the states are grouped into six geo-political zones: North East, North West, North Central, South South, South East and the South West. There are further sub-divided into Seven Hundred and Seventy four (774) Local Government Areas. (FGN, 1999). Nigeria is the most populous nation in sub-Saharan Africa with an estimated population of One Hundred and Seventy Million out of which 70% (112,000,000) live in the rural areas..The main occupation of the adult population is subsistence agriculture for family feeding and income generation. There are also large populations of semi skilled and unskilled young adults that engage in manual labour are artisans and some of them are traders. The rural children are equally engaged by their families in

farm work. This affects school attendance and their overall academic performance. The consequence for acquisition of basic literacy skills of reading, writing and calculation are obvious.

The rural areas of Nigeria present the dominant traits of the peasantry in Africa; they include poverty, illiteracy, and poor health and accommodation conditions. Social services and infrastructure are very inadequate or nonexistent in most instances. In a study conducted in 2013, only 33.75% of the sample could read and write in English or any other language. (Eme-Uche, 2013) this contradicts the NLS (2010) that put literacy rate at 48.7%. This situations account for the decline in literacy rates recorded in EFA 2013 Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2013) and threatens the realization of Goal 2 of the MDGs by 2015.

4. LITERACY IN NIGERIA

Contrary to the documentations of western scholars; literacy pre - dates colonialism in Nigeria. In the traditional communities, in addition to oral literacy, there were established modes of communication that were understood by the members of the communities. These communication systems were written or/and oral and employed in social relations, religion, governance and commerce.

They were to a large extent standardized and highly coded. They comprised signs, symbols, arts and artifacts. Communal groups, organizations and cult groups had their peculiar mode of communication that was written and oral. The appreciation of the writings is limited to the cults, groups and communities that use them. However, oral literacy enjoyed wider usage in varying contexts within a community, clan or region. A good example is the NSIBIDI that was an indigenous adaptable and fluid writing system that was and still in use in the South East and South South zones of Nigeria. Its origin has been traced to the Ekpe cult groups and other titled societies within these areas and was to an extent universal within the area, in the sense that it was an acknowledge mode of communication in social, political, religious and commercial transactions. There was also Arabic literacy which was widely used in the northern zones and Islamic communities of Nigeria.

The incursion of the Christian missions, missionaries and colonialism changed the definition of literacy in Nigeria. The quest for teachers, catechists, evangelists for schools, churches and staff for the colonial government resulted to formal literacy learning in colonial missionary schools. In view of the fore going; under the colonial regime; literacy became the ability to read, write and calculate in English language at the expense of the already existing modes of literacy that were very effective.

The Federal Government of Nigeria acknowledges that the level of national development hinges on the level of education. The landmark in government's intervention in literacy in Nigeria was the establishment of the Adult Literacy Programmes by the University of Ibadan with the support of UNESCO in 1965. In addition, the FGN has launched many literacy campaigns and participates actively in literacy efforts on the aegis of the United Nations and African union.

In 1977 the Universal Primary Education scheme was launched as foundational for literacy. This was followed in 1982 by the 10year National Literacy Campaign and directed states to establish agencies for mass mobilization and education. At the national level, the Federal Government established two agencies namely:

- i. The Directorate for Food, roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) and
- ii. The Directorate for social Mobilization which morphed into the National Orientation Agency (NOA)

These agencies were directed to assist the states in the implementation of Mass Literacy Programmes. It is important to note that the literacy campaign was re - launched in 1992. Another giant stride by the federal government was the establishment of the National Commission for Mass literacy and Non Formal Education in 1990. Its cardinal objective was to eradicate illiteracy in collaboration with all interested parties. Other programmes that have been deployed to eradicate illiteracy include the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), The Youth Employment Schemes (YES), The National Orientation Agency (NOA) has programmes that target youths and employments. The government's efforts have been supported by development partners and NGOs.

In line with her commitments to the UDHR, EFA (Jomtien & Dakar) and the MDGs; Nigeria acknowledges education as a human right. To this effect; the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the NEEDS and the Vision 20, 20:20 highlight the quality education as strategic for all the nation's developmental efforts.

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) and the Universal Basic Education Act (2004) domesticate Nigeria's commitments to EFA (Jomtien, 1990 & Dakar,2000), Convention on the Rights of the Child –CRC (1999) and the MDGs (2000). Section 3 of the NPE (2004) provides a 9year basic education of 6 years primary and 3years junior secondary.

The above commitments of the FGN to eradicate illiteracy notwithstanding, it is still very prevalent in Nigeria. According to the most recent National Literacy Survey (NLS, 2010); regional and gender disparities persist. Adult literacy rate is 56.9%;. The Literacy rate in Lagos state is 92% while it is 14.5% in Bornu state. The literacy rate in urban areas is 74.6% as against 48.7% in the rural areas and 65.1% for male and 48.6% for female. In addition, the Federal Ministry of Education records show that only 500,000 of the 40million adult illiterate attend literacy classes. There are also 3.5million nomadic out of school age children with only 450,000 of them accessing any form of schooling. In all; the NLS (2010) indicate that 17 states out of the 36 states and the federal capital Territory (FCT) are at the risk of not achieving EFA and MDGs that have adult literacy rates between 14.5% to 49.3%. This is a major concern to all stakeholders. The large percentage of this group of Nigerians is located in the rural areas where they are not easily reachable

5. THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In 2000 the nations of the world under the aegis of the United Nations declared eight development goals for the millennium. The overall objective of the MDGs is the eradication of poverty in all ramifications, promotion of human rights and development by 2015. Reaffirming this objective, the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon (2013) state:

The MDGs set time bound targets by which progress in reducing income, Poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion while promoting gender equality, health, education and environmental sustainability can be measured. They also embody basic human rights- the rights of each person on the planet to health, education, shelter and security

The MDGs comprise Goals:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

The overall assessment of Africa's progress toward the MDGs indicate that, while progress has generally been positive, performance has been mixed across indicators and countries, and based on current trends. Specifically; the overall pace of progress is inadequate and not likely to achieve the MDGs by the target date of 2015. This is largely the product of the global economic and financial crises that has resulted in the decline of foreign aids from the development partners that include: international donor and development agencies, developed economies of North America and Europe to Africa, the modest recoveries recorded notwithstanding; the devastating impacts of global warming on food production, security and food shortages, wars, conflicts and insecurity resulting from terrorism in most regions of Africa and consequent under funding of the MDGs by developing countries. All these impinge on access to quality education which is the determinant of literacy rates/levels. To that effect the centrality of literacy to the realization of the MDGs cannot be over emphasized

6. LITERACY AND THE REALIZATION OF THE MDGS IN RURAL NIGERIA

The former UN Secretary of the United Nations, Kofi Annan notes that:

Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in Modern society. It is the bulwark against poverty and building block for development, an essential complement to investment in roads, dams, clinics and factories. Literacy is a platform for democratization and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. Especially for girls and women, its an agent of family health and nutrition for everyone, everywhere, literacy along with education in general, a basic human right. Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress through which every man, and child can realize his or her full potential.

The above declaration by Kofi Annan says it all. It succinctly describes the impact of literacy on attaining the MDGs targets.

Nigeria as a signatory to the Millennium Declaration commit to the realization of the MDGs by 2015. The MDGs provide a framework of time-bound goals and targets through which progress can be measured, using a baseline of 1990. (UNESCO,2013). As a member of the United Nations, Nigeria keyed into the MDGs ; the nationalization of the MDGs heralded the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy –NEEDS (2004) which is Nigeria’s home grown MDGs that was further projected by the 7point Agenda(2007). The goals of the NEEDS and the 7point Agenda are: Wealth creation, Employment Generation, Poverty Reduction. Value re-Orientation and Power & Energy, Food Security, Wealth Creation, Transport Sector, Land Reforms, Security and Education respectively. All these initiatives are strategies directed towards the actualization of the MDGs in Nigeria. Its saddening that all these initiatives have not enhanced the status of the MDGs in Nigeria in general and in the rural areas specifically.

Fig. 1: Millennium Development Goals: 2013 Progress Chart

Goals and Targets	Sub- Saharan Africa
GOAL 1 Eradicate Extreme Poverty And Hunger	
Reduce extreme poverty by half	very high poverty
Productive and decent employment	Very large deficit in decent work
Reduce hunger by half	Very high hunger
Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education	
Universal Primary Schooling	Moderate enrolment
Goal 3 : Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women	
Equal girls’ enrolment in primary school	Close to parity
Women’s share of paid employment	Medium share
Women’s equal representation in national parliaments	Moderate representation
Goal 4 : Reduce Child Mortality	

Reduce mortality of under five- year-olds by two thirds	High mortality
Goal 5 : Improve maternal health	
Reduce maternal mortality by three quarters	very high mortality
Access to reproductive health	Low access
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	
Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS	high incidence
Halt and reverse the spread of tuberculosis	Moderate mortality
Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability	
Halve proportion of population without improved drinking water	Low coverage
Halve proportion of population without sanitation	Very Low coverage
Improve the lives of slum-dwellers	very high proportion of slum-dwellers
Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development	
Internet users	Moderate usage

Source: Culled from the Compilation by Statistics Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations.

A critical look at Fig. 1 above shows that only two targets namely: Equal girls' enrolment in primary school ; Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS are likely to be met by 2015. Although the data is based on sub – Saharan Africa; it is typical of the conditions in Nigeria. Fig.1 confirms all that have been said and written on the likelihood of Nigeria not attaining the MDGs; this situation is highly critical in the rural areas. Unfortunately; the most prominent reason adduced has been poor funding. This paper argues that literacy is the catalyst to the realization of the MDGs. Conversely; low literacy rates recorded in Nigeria is the most significant of the problems associated to the realization of the MDGs.

The Copenhagen Declaration of 1995 seems to shed more light on what really constitutes poverty when it assets:

Poverty has various manifestations, including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihood; hunger and malnutrition, ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services, increase morbidity and mortality from illness, homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments, social discriminations and exclusion. It is also characterized by a lack of participation in decision and in civil, social and cultural life.

The above declaration aptly describes the character of poverty in Nigeria. This presentation is very severe in the rural areas when other indicators such as services and development indices are considered; consequent upon to the strategic exclusion of the rural areas from development initiatives of past governments since independence. Poverty is a complex cycle of deprivation, with a high level of vulnerability to changes in social, economic, ecological and demographic circumstances. It is not a homogeneous phenomenon, with a single solution. Whatever measure of poverty is used – for example US\$1 or 2 a day to live on – the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. Moreover, a map of areas of high illiteracy in the world corresponds quite closely with a map of high levels of poverty, and literacy competence is an essential learning outcome contributing to economic development (UNESCO, 2011). In sub-Saharan Africa, almost half the populations live on less than \$1.25 a day. Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region that saw the number of people living in extreme poverty rise steadily, from 290 million in 1990 to 414 million in 2010, accounting for more than a third of people worldwide who are destitute. There ample evidence that Illiteracy is associated to a significant extent with extreme poverty. For instance; Evidence from the Rural Poverty Report 2011 (IFAD, 2010) shows that rural poverty is still very high in Africa (excluding North Africa). The rural–urban divide in poverty incidence persists. Literacy is one of the

features – but a universal one – that is linked with poverty reduction, economic growth and wealth. In this perspective, it is not literacy on its own that makes a difference, but rather what it enables people to do in order to benefit from new freedoms and address poverty– accessing information, using services they have a right to and reducing vulnerability to disease or ecological change

Literacy is recognized within the international human rights regime as a human right and a veritable instrument for the realization of other rights. Consequently the benefits bestowed by literacy are enormous; Anna Robinson-Pant (2005) identifies the benefits of literacy as human, cultural, social, political, human and economic. The Federal government acknowledges that literacy education will help equip individuals with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for economic self-sufficiency, poverty reduction and sustainable development. Adult literacy will help the people to ease challenges they encounter in their daily lives such as challenges of poverty, income generation, health issues, shelter, food, security etc. these life challenges and more are captured by the MDGs. However, this is still a huge challenge as the majority of illiterates in Nigeria live in remote rural communities, far from the purview of the government. They remain marginalized and unreachable. (Eme-Uche, 2013)

The 2011 MDGs Report: Assessing Progress in Africa toward the Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2011) highlights that the MDGs are closely interlinked, hence the need for an integrated approach to accelerate their achievement. For instance, gender empowerment, education, poverty, and health are inextricably linked. This interconnectedness will guide the discussion of the topic.

These benefits of literacy projects that literacy underscore in the realization of the MDGs. Considering MDGs ;The correlation between literacy and the realization of these goals cannot be over –emphasized. Literacy if the fundamental to the realization of the MDGs. The economic returns to education have been extensively studied, especially in terms of increased individual income and economic growth. Empowered by literacy and numeracy, a person will be able to recognize and make economic, social and political choices Functional literacy bestowed by quality education impart skills, training and other marketable credentials for the labor markets. When people are educated they are gainfully employed thereby liberating themselves from extreme poverty and hunger.

The relationship between literacy and informed participation in public affairs can not be over emphasized (Eme-Uche, 2014). Literacy bestowed by quality education improves the self esteem, this is more so for women. that have been marginalized in public affairs irrespective of Nigeria's commitments to international Human Rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution on Fundamental Human Rights and Nigeria's Gender Policy. It is an incontrovertible fact that literacy empowers women with the necessary skills for civic engagement,, transforms their orientations/dispositions and liberates them from religious and cultural stereotypes that hinder them from political participation. Although there is still a lot of room for improvement; more women occupy elective and appointive positions in government courtesy of literacy and numeracy bestowed by quality education.

Also; research shows that women who participate in literacy programmes have better knowledge of health and family planning, and are more likely to adopt preventive health measures like Immunization or to seek medical help for themselves and their children. Literacy skills confer the skills required to read drug labels, dispense drugs according to doctors prescriptions,, appreciate and apply basic hygiene and sanitary tips for healthy living for their families, The correlation between education and lower birth rates is well established, though little research has been done on the impact of adult literacy programmes on reproductive behavior.

Educated parents, especially mothers – whether through formal schooling or adult programmes – are more likely to send their children to school and to help them with their studies. Research reveals a correlation between women's literacy and the positive development of the family and the community in terms of their economic situation, education and health. There is evidence that literate women, even those with relatively low levels of literacy, are more likely to send their daughters to school than those without any literacy at all. This is a very result oriented strategy for tackling the problem of gender parity in access to education.

It is obvious that Goals 7 & 8 are largely dependent of government input in the provision of amenities and infrastructure. However, environmental sustainability also depends on level of awareness on the environmental impacts of our actions. This can only be attained through environmental education and awareness programmes;

that only literate members of the community can appreciate and benefit from. Although it is the duty of government to frame policies and provide infrastructure for ICT facilities; the usage and benefits of the internet in everyday life can only be harnessed by literate persons.

7. THE WAY FORWARD

The foregoing has brought to the fore the prominence of literacy as an indispensable tool for the realization of the MDGs in rural Nigeria. The federal government of Nigeria has adopted various strategies, policies and programmes to improve literacy levels but the desired outcome of enhanced literacy levels at all regions have not been attained. However; it is important to stress that literacy levels would most likely remain low if universal access to quality basic education through formal and non-formal processes is not guaranteed. The failure of previous literacy programmes were partly due to lack of ownership of the programmes and their presumed irrelevance to the needs and aspirations of the rural populace. There are also lack of clarity of and convictions on the benefits of literacy to the rural populace.

Sequel to the above; this paper suggests inter-ministerial approach at the national level. This entails integrating literacy programmes with poverty alleviation, gender initiatives, health, religious and the MDGs initiatives. This strategy demands inter-ministerial collaboration between all the ministries and MDAs involved.

The NLS (2010) noted low patronage of adult literacy centers in some regions, it is the view of this paper that this situation is a result of the exclusion of the target groups from the planning and organization of the programmes. An alternative is to involve the cultural organizations like the age grades, women's groups, existing traditional institutions and leadership in the literacy initiatives. but now other

Education has been cited as the best means of overcoming poverty caused by illiteracy. Improving literacy skills is a key first step to overcoming the obstacles that lock individuals into a cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Ensure unhindered access to quality basic education

The current situation where there are 10.5million out of school children, most of whom are in the rural areas, account for the low literacy rates in some regions which is counterproductive for the realization of the MDGs in rural Nigeria.

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