

THE UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION’S (UNESCO) SUPPORT FOR ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA, 1946-2010: IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which is one of the United Nations Organization’s (UNO) agencies is specialized in helping countries to work together in areas of Education, Science and Culture. One of the main aims of UNESCO, is ensuring that everyone in the world has free access to education and must be able to read and write especially in the language of his or her environment. This article analyses the contributions to, and impacts of UNESCO’s various International Conferences and activities on, Adult Literacy Education in Nigeria between 1946 and 2010. The article discussed why the rate of adult illiteracy is still very high despite the efforts of UNESCO and the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Keywords: Literacy, Education, Access

Introduction

UNESCO has, since 1946, started series of International Conferences known as CONFINTEA, following the French version of Conférences Internationales Sur l’Education des

Adultes, which specifically focused on the development of adult education and adult literacy as influenced and inspired by the historical contexts of each country (Hinzen, 2010).

The introduction of Western or European Education in Nigeria by the Christian Missionaries in 1842 led many people especially the adults to become illiterates in the reading, writing and numerating in the newly introduced roman alphabets and prints. The early attempt to provide some meaningful directions for adult literacy educational development in Nigeria was deficient because the schooling system which was adopted to provide literacy education was not adequate. The available primary schools were not properly planned to accommodate all the children of school-age in the various communities. Thus, an army of unschooled children who had no schooling experience later became adult illiterates at adulthood. In the attempt to allow the school-age children to attend schools, the adults were fenced out of the schooling system only for a few of the adults to attend Christian “Sunday Schools” before some of them could become literates in the new form of European education.

The high rate of illiteracy among the adults in the new form of Western education reached an alarming proportion such that the British colonial office recognized this in its Memorandum on Education Policy in the British Tropical Africa published in 1925 recommended the implementation of an Adult Education programme in the African continent (Fafunwa, 1974 &1991). The colonial government in Nigeria accepted the recommendation in 1930, and in 1943, published a document on the subject. Actual implementation of the recommendation started in 1944 but with great limitations. The first Mass Literacy Campaign was launched in 1946 by the Colonial government as a result of the 1944 recommendation. No serious attempts were made on adult literacy education in Nigeria until when the Federal Government became a bonafide member of UNESCO and began to send delegates to International Conferences organized by the organization.

Mass Literacy Campaign was done not only to sensitize the stark illiterate people towards becoming literate but to wipe out illiteracy in the country as a policy. This early effort of government failed to achieve any appreciable success because of many factors ranging from inadequate funding to lack of political will to back the campaign. It is against this background that this study assesses the trend and challenges in the promotion of effective adult literacy education and the prospect of achieving Education for All in Nigeria by the UNESCO world target year, 2015.

The founding of UNESCO in 1945 arose out of the ways in which adult education was perceived and how the international organizations saw themselves as having an international role to play in fostering education for the under-privileged people of the world in order to fulfill the aim of the UNO in those areas that could not be handled by national agencies alone (Knoll, 2009). UNESCO stands specifically for literacy in developing and industrialized countries of the world for large-scale programmes on lifelong learning and for varieties in adult education systems. With the aid of UNESCO, Non-governmental Organizations were later seriously involved in combating adult illiteracy in Nigeria.

Literacy Trend and Issues

The first Adult Mass Literacy Campaign was launched in Nigeria in 1946. Literacy therefore became a weapon to fight ignorance and inequality in the Nigerian society. Also UNESCO had since 1949 brought Adult Literacy Education into International focus. The high rate of adult illiteracy in Nigeria had given, researchers in education many sleepless nights ruminating on how to tackle the unpleasant development. It is recognized in Nigeria that illiteracy is a factor of under-development. This realization led most countries of the world to wage war against the scourge of illiteracy on all fronts. Afigbo (1984), even predicts a rise in adult illiteracy if nothing drastic is done to combat it in Nigeria.

Literacy began and continued to be a major international issue recognized as a crucial element for the economic and political viability of both developing and industrialized nations. Literacy education brought together international specialists to address issues concerning the improvement of literacy efforts amidst dramatic political, economic and cultural changes taking place around the world, as well as to explore innovative areas for improvement.

Literacy is one of the fundamental requirements of modern civilization because the functional significance of a people's ability to read and write depends on it. There is no doubting the fact that a nation needs about 40% literacy level among its citizens for sustained economic growth as well as socio-political benefits and sustainable democracy. In colonial Nigeria, more than half the population was not prepared for productive existence. This was one of the factors why the colonial office decided to launch mass literacy campaign in 1946.

From the take-off of western education in Nigeria, the adult had been denied primary education. In addition the inadequacy of the primary schools most of which were not within the

reach of the school-age children caused childhood illiteracy. Although between 1949 and 1960, UNESCO had put in place strategies to promote adult education for all nations, the impact was never seriously felt at this period in Nigeria. There was a consistent increase in adult illiteracy because there was no follow-up by the Colonial government to relaunch Mass Literacy Campaign in Nigeria as the 1946 campaign did not reach a significant proportion of the target.

The struggle of individual African states to wipe out illiteracy received an external boost with the holding of the first Regional Conference on Policy and Co-operation in 1961 in Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia. The Addis-Ababa Conference was followed closely by a second one in Abidjan, coted'ivoire in 1964, a third one in Nairobi, Kenya in 1968, a fourth one in Lagos, Nigeria in 1976 and a fifth one in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1983 (Omagbemi, 1985).

All these UNESCO organized conferences had serious impacts on the literacy situations of the countries in the sub-region. In Nigeria, and in the light of the experiment conducted over the past 39 years, on literacy and activities related to it, the Higher institutions began purposeful researches into, and pilot projects, training of instructors for, adult basic and functional literacy programmes.

Nigeria, before 1960, never had a serious share of UNESCO's effort to promote adult education for the country as an international policy. But between 1966 and 1979 when the first military intervention began and ended, Nigeria realized the important place and role UNESCO as an organization could play in the basic education industry.

UNESCO 's Role in Adult Literacy in Nigeria

UNESCO is seen as a laboratory of ideas, a standard-setter and a clearing house which is actively involved in capacity development of the 156 member countries thereby fostering international cooperation. Since Nigeria had actually come to partner with UNESCO Nigerians had been entrusted with studies on repositioning adult literacy education for improvement.

During the military era in Nigeria, the involvement of UNESCO as an International Organization in Nigeria educational system was obvious. From the 1970s, Nigeria began to show serious and keen interest in what UNESCO could do in relation to education. Consequently, the Federal Military Government under General Yakubu Gowon, began to send delegates to world Conferences organized by UNESCO. This prompted a considerable enrolment each time Mass Literacy Campaign was relaunched. As a matter of fact, Jayeola-

Omoyeni (2003) notes that mass literacy campaign was relaunched in Nigeria in 1982, 1993, 1999 and 2003 nationally. These campaigns gave rise to:

1. Finding out how to adequately mobilize the illiterate participants and their instructors;
2. Generating an increased interest in literacy education by the illiterate adults and governments;
3. Encouraging the promoting agencies –state, local government, to continue with the scheme;
4. Fostering intensive research on adult literacy by higher educational institutions;
5. Providing some statistical details of adult illiteracy to enable more attention on literacy programme;
6. Harnessing of resources by government to have effective planning, funding and administration of adult literacy in Nigeria.
7. Sensitizing the illiterates in the rural areas towards literacy programme.

However, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) was not serious in handling literacy education programme. It became evident that it was during the re-launching that a high percentage of enrolment was always noted. After some few months of teaching and learning, about three-quarters or 75 percent of enrollees would not be found in the learning centres! The sustenance of learners at the learning centres was a big problem which the government did not address concretely.

In March (1971), the Nigerian National Council for Adult Education (NNCAE) as noted by the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (1997) was formed to foster the development of adult education programmes. The Council, which was made up of adult educators and intellectuals from public and private agencies, was largely instrumental to the establishment of an Adult Education section in the Federal Ministry of Education in 1974. The Council ensured that the 1975/80 National Development Plan in Nigeria had proposals on Adult Education. It thus facilitated the establishment of Adult Education and recommended a ten-year (1982-1992) Mass Literacy Campaign for Nigeria. It was through this effort that the first National Policy on Education (1977) recognized Adult Education where Mass Literacy Education was given priority.

To facilitate the achievement of the ten-year Literacy Campaign objectives the Federal Government of Nigeria directed that each State of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, should establish an Agency for Mass Education. Two Agencies of the Federal Government – the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) and the Directorate for Social Mobilization (MAMSER), were directed to assist the State Agencies in implementing the National Campaign. However, for reasons of funding, logistics and poor planning, very little success was achieved.

Between 1970 and 1980, the illiteracy rate in Nigeria came down to about 60.5 percent. The initiative of UNESCO had assisted to propel the Federal Government of Nigeria to be deeply involved in adult literacy works such that there was a considerable improvement in promoting adult literacy. There is no gain saying the fact that there was a drop in the high rate of adult illiteracy as expressed by Agun (1980), as government seemed to attend to basic strategies learnt through the several UNESCO Conferences between 1961 and 1980.

Out of the several UNESCO sponsored conferences, the 1983 Harare conference put forward various recommendations for stepping up literacy activities and for the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000. In Nigeria, the war against illiteracy was to be fought on two fronts – one being the provision of school education since illiteracy is basically the result of lack of schooling, and the other – the education of the illiterate adult whose ranks were swollen by young people who left school prematurely without attaining the mastery of adequate reading and writing in the language of their environment.

In March, 1990, the world assembled in Jomtien, Thailand, to observe the International Literacy Year, under the sponsorship of UNESCO. The assembly resolved that there would be Education for All by the Year 2000. Nigeria was a signatory to that Declaration and to the other follow-up conference which took place in New Delhi, India in December 1995.

The establishment of the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education in 1990, was a reply to the International call and initiative on Education for All. Through UNESCO, the annual celebration of Mass Literacy in Nigeria like all other countries of the world, was to sensitize the people, harness resources to mobilize and ginger the illiterate people to learn. Nigeria in 1990 was still battling with about 70.5 percent illiterate adults according to Fafunwa (1992) despite UNESCO efforts and the Federal Government's activities on literacy.

The Federal Military Government put in place strategies to provide universal primary education and eliminate illiteracy among adults and young people who had not attended school. Emphasis was also placed on women, girls and the rural population, and the introduction of educational planning whereby formal education and various types of non-formal education were better coordinated to ensure rational use of the available human and material resources to tackle illiteracy.

Statistical Information

Table 1: Nigerian Population and Literacy

Year	(a) Nigeria Census Population	(b) Literacy in Roman Scripts	(c) Illiteracy in Roman Script	(d) % Literate	(e) % Illiterate
1953	31,600,000	1,854,906	29,745,094	5.9%	94.1%
1963	55,670,000	8,020,044	47,649,956	14.4%	85.6%
1991	88,992,220	33,817,044	55,175,176	38%	61.62%
2006	140,003,452	61,602,558	78,401,984	44%	56

Sources: (a) National Population commission, Abuja. (b) Lai, J. (1995) Nigeria: shadow of a great nation, Lagos: Dubeo press limited. (c) Literacy and illiteracy in roman prints only, (d&e) Percentage calculation is that of authors based on the percentage distribution of persons who never attended school in the Annual abstract of statistics (2009) Abuja: Government press.

In 1953, out of a total population of 31,600,000 only about 5.86 percent of the population was literate in the roman prints – being the official model accepted and used in government circle by the British colonial masters. But in 1991, Nigerian population was 88,992,220 out of which 55,175,176 Nigerians were illiterates in the roman prints (see Table1). The Nigerian population according to the 2006 population census was 140,003,542 from which Nigeria harboured 60,481,531 about 56.8% illiterates in the roman scripts. As could be seen in table 1, there was a drop in illiteracy since 1953. But the fall in the rate of illiteracy was not encouraging enough! Nigeria continued to celebrate yearly the 8th , September International Literacy Day when people both literate and illiterate were sensitized and encouraged to see the importance of literacy in their livelihood. The literates were encouraged to aid the illiterate ones in their midst

to become literates through the introduction or adoption of the Laubach (1995) method of each-one-teach-one or each-one-fund the teaching of one.

The efforts of UNESCO has brought illiteracy in Nigeria into International focus like other nations of the world; it has done a lot according to the objective for which it was set up, to assist, to attack and fight a spirited war, to eliminate the scourge of illiteracy in Nigeria by cooperating or partnering with significant agencies and with the Federal Government in this regard.

Taking a look at the trends of Mass Literacy Campaigns since 1946 – by the Colonial government up to 1960, by the Post-Independence Federal Government of Nigeria up to 1966, by the Federal Military Government, up to 1999, and by the Nigerian Democratic government from 1999, a lot has been seen to have been done by UNESCO. According to Jayeola-Omoyeni (2003), the Mass Literacy Campaigns launched in Nigeria to date with the exception of that of 1946, were done at the instance or inspiration of UNESCO. But the various policies formulated to promote adult literacy by the Federal Government and UNESCO were still inadequate due to the following factors:

- a) Politics – ranging from constitutional reforms, political parties rivalries, elections, military coups to political instability.
- b) Government educational policies – government lip-service approach, poor funding, lack of strong political will.
- c) Ignorance – lack of understanding of the values of education by the illiterate adults.
- d) Poor self esteem – lack of self confidence, fear of failure in examinations and lack of the knowledge of the values of literacy education in their lives.

It is important to emphasize the fact that adult literacy education as projected by UNESCO through the Federal Government of Nigeria had an improvement over the years. Table 1, shows that of the 1953 Nigeria population of 31.6 million, about 5.9% was only able to read and write in the roman scripts. A total number of 94.1% of that population was considered as illiterate. But from 1961 upward, as a result of the serious involvement of UNESCO, there was a little drop in the percentage of illiterates from 94.1 to 85.6 percent in the 1963 census as indicated in table 1. There is no denying the fact that the Federal, State and Local Governments put some machineries in place in order to promote literacy. As the population increased from

31,600,000 in 1953 to 55,670,000 in 1963, 88,992,220 in 1991 and 140,003,542 in 2005, there was a remarkable drop of illiterates from about 94.1 in 1953 to 56 percent in 2006 – a drop of 44 percent in 53 years!

It must be noted as done by Laleye (1996) that 76 percent of Nigeria's population is adult of which between 70 and 80 percent is illiterate. This means that out of the 140,003,542 Nigerians in 2006 census the illiterate population was about 78,401,984. It must be conceded that there had been no consistent and absolute statistical data on the rate of literacy and illiteracy in Nigeria. This is perhaps why Akinpelu (1992:27) stressed that:

in the absence of any firm or solid statistical data, we go by the Census rate in 1946 whose illiterate was 91% which has dropped to about 70% in 1991; but the later rate has translated into 55 to 50 million absolute adult illiterates. When we add a prospective illiterate population of 8.3 million (or 37.5%) from children who drop out of school or have never seen the inside of a classroom.

The efforts of the Nigerian government to increase the rate of adult literacy was not commensurate with UNESCO's commitment. Thus, Adult illiteracy was on the increase (Callaway, 1985). Omolewa, (1981), Afigbo (1984), Aminu (1988) Akinpelu (1990) Fafunwa (1992), Tugbiyele (1993) and Jayeola-Omoyeni (2003) among others, concurred and indicated a rise in adult illiteracy despite UNESCO's intervention not so much for the nature of the intervention as of daunting domestic challenges.

The problem now is to establish the major causes of the increase in the rate of adult illiteracy in Nigeria despite all the efforts made to stamp out illiteracy in the country. Apart from the series of campaigns which were made between 1946 and 2003 and the (September 8), yearly sensitization of people, only a negligible drop in the rate of illiteracy was recorded. UNESCO and the Federal Government of Nigeria to some extent did what they could to control the problem of illiteracy with regards to (a) mobilization of the illiterates for enrolment; (b) mobilization of the instructors to teach; (c) reaching the would-be learners in their various locations; (e) strategizing for providing the appropriate learning materials; (f) strategies for improvising the appropriate learning materials; (g) making learning to reflect the occupation of the learners-functional literacy; (h) establishment of the department of adult education in the Higher Institutions from 1960s; (i) writing primers and literature texts to aid the learners in the

language of their environments; (j) providing post-literacy activities in adult literacy scheme; (l) establishing National and State Commissions for mass literacy, adult and non-formal education to promote effective literacy drive (1990s); (m) organization of pilot projects in mass literacy, adult and non-formal education; (n) establishment of mobile library so that reading text could reach the rural dwellers; (o) establishment of Nomadic and migrant fishermen education to ensure rapid and successful eradication of illiteracy among the group; and (p) organization of several workshops for the training and re-training of instructors.

Persistent Illiteracy problems in Nigeria

Various conceptual understanding or misunderstanding – continued to exist and impede a more vigorous and systematic reduction of the rate of illiteracy in Nigeria despite the efforts of UNESCO to make education more accessible to all citizens in the country. As practitioners in the field of Adult education and Education in general, we stress the need for adult education to be context-specific, and attend to the learning needs of the groups by whom it is demanded and for whom it is offered.

Evidence shows beyond doubt that there exist a strong correlation between poverty and illiteracy and low levels of formal education for the majority of Nigerians. The majority of the population is in the rural areas where they live in poverty or absolute want. Nigerians as a matter of fact have major quality and equity issues which are basically related to (a) socio-economic condition, (b) zone of residence (urban/rural), (c) ethnic identity and language and (d) gender.

On the part of the stark illiterates in Nigeria and based on the research conducted for this study as to why the rate of illiteracy had been consistently high in the period under review, the responses we collected showed an alarming index in support of ignorance and poverty as being correlated and co-jointly impeding UNESCO's caring efforts to eliminate illiteracy in Nigeria.

In the research being reported here, a ten-item questionnaire sought information on what caused the continued high adult illiteracy education in Nigeria, and what to do to drastically reduce the rate of adult illiteracy so as to enhance national development. A total number of 1287 people responded to the items of the questionnaire between 2005 and 2011. The responses comprised 741 literates and 546 illiterates randomly selected across Nigeria. Table 2 shows the responses of the literates on the research.

Table 2: Responses to the causes of high adult illiteracy in Nigeria and some steps to take to reduce adult illiteracy (Literacy Questionnaire)

S/N	Probable causes of increase in adult illiteracy (741)	Yes	%	What to do to reduce illiteracy
1.	No clear-cut political ideology for the country	236	31.8	Government should effect a new political order to cater for the welfare of the people.
2.	Lack of strong political will	741	100	Literacy education should be above partisan politics and be totally supported by government.
3.	Lack of sufficient funds	324	43.7	Government should provide enough funds
4.	Lack of teaching incentives	604	81.4	Government should pay the instructors regularly and encourage them to reach the interior rural areas.
5.	Lack of effective mobilization of the learners	706	95.3	Adult learners should be mobilized and learning centres established very close to the people.
6.	Religious bigotry	410	55.3	Women should be allowed and encouraged by their husbands to learn at the learning centres.
7.	Lack of sufficient learning centres in the local government areas	674	90.9	Government should open more centres in the local government areas especially in the rural areas and market places.
8.	Drop out is very high after enrolments.	736	99.3	Methods of teaching should improve to sustain the learners at the learning centres.

Source – Authors' research (2011)

Different to the items in table II administered to the illiterates was what to do to mobilize the illiterates to enroll and be sustained to learn. The response was a shocking request for

payment of monthly salary or stipends to the learners until they acquire the skills of reading and writing in the roman print and in the language of the environment. This response show the level of poverty and ignorance of the stark illiterates. Out of a sample of 546, all the samples (100%) indicated that participants should be paid for learning!

The concern of the illiterate ones was to be paid for “sacrificing” their time to learn at evenings! What a wonderful revelation. UNESCO never recommended this option and it is doubtful if any government would be disposed to paying the learners for coming out to the learning centres to learn. This means that a high rate of illiteracy may still continue to be in Nigeria if paying the participants is absolutely ignored!

Conclusion

From the foregoing we have discovered that different trends have left deep imprints on the development of adult literacy education in Nigeria. It is clear that lack of strong political will was the major factor that hindered effective promotion of adult literacy in Nigeria. Politics, hallmarked by political instability, incessant political and constitutional reforms, incessant changes of leaders, lack of related political ideology, coups, and counter coups, political instability, lack of continuity, inadequacies of funding, mobilizing of learners, planning, monitoring, data collection, provision of facilities, authentic statistical data and personnel in adult literacy programmes have led to the continued increase in adult illiteracy to an alarming magnitude even up to the year 2010.

Adult literacy education devoid of strong political-will and adequate funding / logistic support will continue to fail no matter the administrative experience of the planners and external support for the programme if the voice of the illiterates target who had demanded for some form of financial support is not heard and acted upon.

Recommendation

Looking at Table II a number of what to do to reduce illiteracy in Nigeria had been highlighted. UNESCO and the Federal Government of Nigeria had put all the suggested items in place to fast-track the promotion of literacy but the results had not been seriously impressive when we consider the wave of enlightenment and changes that continue to occur in the society daily. Thus, the recommendation of the illiterates should be taken very seriously.

Strong political will should be preceded by investing heavily on the promotion of adult literacy education such that token monthly stipends are paid to the participants (the learners) as this would boost the morale of the stark illiterate ones wherever they are to come out to learn.

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