



Problems and Prospects of Adult Education for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Adult education is an important avenue for advancing sustainable development in Nigeria through lifelong learning and human-capital development. This paper examines the major problems affecting adult education and considers its prospects for sustainable development. Drawing on relevant literature, the paper identifies poor recognition, inadequate funding, shortage of qualified educators, insufficient infrastructure, weak planning and monitoring, politicisation, socio-economic barriers and poor sensitisation as major constraints. Despite these challenges, adult education has considerable potential to support skills development, health improvement, environmental awareness, poverty reduction, civic participation and labour-market development. The paper argues that stronger government commitment, improved funding, professional staffing, relevant curricula, effective monitoring, stakeholder participation and appropriate use of technology are necessary to strengthen adult education in Nigeria. A more responsive adult education system can contribute substantially to inclusive human development and sustainable national development.

Keywords: Adult Education, empowers, Growth, Problems & Prospects, Sustainable Development

Introduction

The current state of adult education for sustainable development in Nigeria is a pressing issue amid a growing population and rising demand for skilled workers. Adult education programs must be effective and sustainable. However, the current state is not promising, with limited access to education, insufficient resources, and inadequate funding. This has led to a lack of opportunities for adults to acquire the skills and knowledge needed for sustainable development. Therefore, it is vital to address these challenges to improve Nigeria and, in turn, society and the environment. On one hand, there are significant barriers to accessing education, such as poverty, illiteracy, and a lack of infrastructure. On the other hand, there is growing recognition of the need for sustainable development in Nigeria, leading to the implementation of various initiatives and programs to promote education for sustainable development (Okirika, 2023).

The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, also known as CONFINTEA V, held in 1997 and published on pages 253-254, discusses the concept of adult education as a continuous journey. It stresses the importance of human-centred development and of a participatory society that fully respects human rights to achieve sustainable and equitable development. The conference highlights the critical role of both men and women across all aspects of life in tackling the challenges that lie ahead. According to CONFINTEA V, adult education plays a crucial role in promoting environmentally sustainable development and creating a world where conflicts are resolved through dialogue and a culture of peace built on principles of justice. Not only does adult education help shape one's identity, but it also gives life meaning. The CONFINTEA V emphasises the transformative power of adult education and its potential to create a more harmonious and equitable future for all. Adult education is a diverse field that includes formal, continuing, non-formal, and informal learning opportunities in a multicultural society. This field emphasises both theoretical and practical approaches to learning. According to CONFINTEA V, the significant impact of adult education on sustainable

development can be harnessed by educating an aware and accepting society, fostering economic and social growth, promoting literacy, reducing poverty, and preserving the environment. These crucial elements must be used to achieve sustainable development.

In achieving sustainable development, it is held by CONFINTEA V (1997:254) that the objectives of adult education are to develop the autonomy and the sense of responsibility of people and communities, to reinforce the capacity to deal with the transformations taking place in the economy, in culture and in society as a whole, and to promote co-existence, tolerance and the informed and creative participation of citizens in their communities, to take control of their destiny and society in order to face the challenges ahead. Adult education is not just a basic right to education, but it is indeed one of the building blocks of human development. It is a foundation for progress in areas such as human capital, health, nutrition, and institutional and democratic development. Therefore, the role of adult education in sustainable development can be understood through seminars and cultural determinants of African development (Seya, 2005). Seya further stated that the economic role of adult education in development is apparent in its contribution to human capital formation. Improving living standards and productivity can be achieved through higher labour productivity, better access to healthcare, improved sanitation, and proper nutrition. These factors can reduce sickness, poverty, and mortality rates, ultimately increasing life expectancy. Seya, a proponent of adult education, stresses that adult education programs are crucial to addressing submission through individual participation. Seya suggests that both formal and informal education and training in adult education are essential for citizens to gain access to basic healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health services. This education and training will also aid in the development of new medicines, ultimately leading to freedom from diseases that greatly impact impoverished populations, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and other parasites. Adult education, in its expansive sense, fosters civic participation, enhances individual development, and promotes social integration, going beyond a focus on employability. This encompasses both education and training in the context of adult education. These objectives can be met through vocational training for both young and old individuals, as well as language and intercultural skills training for both younger and older adults.

Liveright and Haygood in Ezimah in Okirika (2023) revealed the definition of adult education as “a process whereby persons who no longer attend school on a regular and full-time basis (unless full-time programmes are specially designed for adults) undertake sequential and organized activities with the conscious intention of bringing about changes in information, knowledge, undertakings or skills, appreciation and attitudes or for the purpose of identifying and solving personal or community problem”. This means that education is not only for the young but for everyone, including adults. It aims at a utilitarian standard of complete living, an ethical standard of morality, the development of personality, the training of mind and body, and the development of character (Abie, 2019).

Some specific definitions of adult education clearly delineate its scope and content from those of non-formal education. For example, Julius Nyerere, the president of Tanzania, exposed the scope of adult education as reported by Nzeneri (2010:12) with this definition:

Adult education covers many of the subjects learned at school for those who never had the opportunity. It applies to every one of us without exception. We can all learn more: those who have been to school, those who have just attended primary school, and those who have attended secondary or university. There is much more that everyone can learn about our work and the areas of knowledge they were not taught at school.

The above definition revealed both the scope and the clients of adult education, including skilled and unskilled professionals and non-professionals. However, a broad acceptable definition of adult education is that given by UNESCO as revealed by Ihejirika in Okirika (2023) “as the entire body of organized educational process whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adults in the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications and bring about changes in their attitudes or behavior in the two fold perspective of full personal and independent social, economic and cultural development”.

Adult education focuses on programs that can tackle the problems of ignorance, malnutrition, and poor health and promote development. Through this avenue, adults can make a valuable contribution to their communities' social and economic development.

Problems of Adult Education Programmes

Various factors limit the effective administration and contribution of adult education to national development.

Poor Recognition: Ezimah in Okirika (2023) argues that adult education is often seen as inferior in the hierarchy of education due to negative sentiment and a lack of recognition. This is evident in the lack of prestige accorded to both the professional staff and learners compared with their counterparts in the formal education system. The common explanation is that adult education is typically pursued by individuals who, for various reasons, did not complete the traditional educational sequence. Otherwise known as dropouts, push-outs, or left-outs.

Wrong Perception of Adult Education: Some people view adult education in terms of how much time they have left to stay in their workplaces or to live. This time perspective influences the educational goals of the older adults. This issue of perception is thus related to the self-image of adult learners, who view themselves as still able to learn. According to Adedokun (2013), adult education is devalued, leading people to develop low self-esteem compared with others in highly valued professions such as law and medicine. With effective planning and management of adult education, feelings of low self-esteem will give way, and learners will value adult education programs.

Underfunding: Underfunding of adult education, coupled with the introduction of fees at adult education centres, led to the collapse of certain adult education programs. This lack of financial support has resulted in inadequate services, insufficient funds for projects, and a struggle to maintain necessary resources for both the physical and human aspects of adult education. Okirika (2023) observed that the government has not prioritised adult education, leading to a lack of infrastructure, qualified teachers, and educational materials. This has resulted in low enrolment rates and poor-quality education. Similarly, Ugwu (2016) noted that it has become a culture in Nigeria to underestimate the cost of programs and to over-rely on external aid that may not come. In the present dispensation, when it seems that voluntary agencies are not forthcoming with the much-needed funds, many literacy programs have stalled for lack of funds for planning and implementation. It is a condition of this kind that has prompted Newman in Ezimah, as revealed by Okirika (2023), to describe adult education as the poorest and often the most neglected sector of education. He described adult education as the poor cousin, tagging along behind the other sector, using borrowed premises, understaffed and ill-equipped, so it would be a surprise if the image it presented to the world were not tarnished –but why had we put the general education class downstairs and not in one of the adult rooms on the top floor? To wnsend Coles in Kajuru (2016) further noted that adult education is treated as an appendage to formal education in budgetary allocation and in national development. According to him, legislators’ understanding of the importance and needs of adult education influences funding. So far, it has failed to engage legislators’ attention to improve its fortunes. Consequently, the view is widely held that “adult education is not a professional job but one better left to the willing, and often unpaid, volunteer amateur”. The proponents of this perspective do not see the need to incorporate permanent positions, full-time appointments, or a defined career path in the non-formal education sector.

Lack of Sufficient Technical and Professional Expertise: The government's failure to recognise adult educators has led employers to hire unqualified individuals for the role, resulting in a significant number of individuals working in adult education without proper qualifications. This has also led to job insecurity, leaving adult educators without pay for months for their work. Similarly, Nzenneri (2008) stated that one of the major impediments to effective adult education programs is the non-availability of qualified educators with adequate training. He said there are not enough educators to manage adult education programs. Most of the time, personnel from other educational systems are deployed to handle adult education programs. According to Fashokun (2008), the lack of technical expertise will go a long way toward hindering the achievement of adult educational objectives. Hassan and Oyebamiji (2012) noted that adult facilitators need andragogical training to be well-versed in the art and science of adult instruction. Understanding andragogy will help instructors communicate effectively with the adults they teach. According to Ezimah in Okirika (2023), adult education functions with minimal full-time qualified staff. Therefore, one barrier to improving adult education programs and initiating new ones is the lack of an adequate pool of qualified, full-time professional staff. Some of those charged with these functions did not major in adult education and therefore have no business being there. This is perhaps an abuse of professionalism that tends to dampen the morale of a handful of professionally qualified staff. Imhabekhei (2009) was of the view that a person who is not a trained adult educator may not function as expected in terms of teaching the adult, and he thus maintained that there is a need to differentiate between the method for teaching the young ones (pedagogy) and the method for teaching adults (andragogy).

Insufficient Basic Facilities and Infrastructure: The provision of essential facilities and infrastructure for teaching, research, and other public service duties has been inadequate, despite efforts by various government, individual, and organisational entities. Furthermore, the administration of adult education has at times been neglected by both governmental and non-governmental organisations. Adult education cannot operate effectively without adequate provision of amenities. Basic amenities like pipe-borne water, health centres, schools and electricity negate plans for any meaningful programme, as most villagers spend the greater part of their time and energy looking for water and firewood. If they come to school at all, they are too weak to face any academic work. Activities are carried out in rented premises and with borrowed equipment (usually in an unconducive environment that does not befit the adult participant's personality), which makes learning ineffective. Under these circumstances, it becomes so difficult for adult education to make optimum contributions to national development.

Poor Planning and Implementation: The challenges faced in the education system, particularly in adult education, are significant. These include inaccurate data, insufficient information sharing, and difficulty in accessing official documents. In addition, there are often misunderstandings about educational plans and goals, as well as a lack of recognition and consideration for the socio-cultural and political factors within Nigerian society. Akinkpelu in Okirika (2023) specifically pointed out that basing a gigantic scheme like the adult literacy programme on a volunteer tutorial system is a faulty implementation strategy.

Poor Supervision and Monitoring: This is attributable to a lack of mobility, personnel, finance, and facilities, as well as the inaccessibility of some adult education centres. All of these culminated in an inability to assess the extent of progress and the realisation of the set goals. Hassan and Oyebamiji (2012) revealed that the main purpose of monitoring in adult education is to identify and promote the actions necessary to improve programme implementation. Monitoring should specifically measure the progress of programme activities, identify and assess the factors affecting the progress of programme activities and the production of programme outputs, and determine the necessary activities and who should undertake them for success.

Poor Incentives: Poor incentives attached to it in the past have failed to attract the best candidates to seek employment as facilitators in the field. Even in these modern days, the situation is not much different, since the condition of the service and the lack of adequate infrastructure have made teaching facilitation largely unattractive to those who see it as a sure way to secure a job.

Undue Politicisation of the Programme: This is one of the major logs, as many local government chairmen, governors and other government officials see it as a part of the democracy dividends to be given only to political loyalists. When this is the case, the issues of where the centre is to be located, who is to be the teachers, and the distribution of instructional materials are determined purely by where one belongs, not by who requires them. As a result, those who require it lack it, while those who do not need it have excess provision made for them (Ugwu, in Okirika, 2023).

Socio-Economic Problem: According to Ugwu in Okirika (2023), the present socio-economic quagmire Nigeria is experiencing has resulted in poor enrolment and an increase in dropout rates in regular schools, thereby swelling the population of those who require adult education services. Associated with this is the fact that most parents do not see the moral justification for “wasting” their time by sending their children to school when they cannot pay their children’s school fees or meet other needs. Such periods are rather used in toiling to make ends meet. Furthermore, adults face barriers to participating in learning and continuing their education, including lack of time, balancing career and family demands, finances, and transportation. As well, factors such as confidence, interest, lack of information about opportunities to learn, scheduling problems, entrance requirements, and problems with adult education contribute to these barriers. Still on socio-cultural barriers, Kpeno (2025) noted that societal norms and cultural expectations can discourage adult education. According to her, in some communities, women may face restrictions on mobility or participation. Older adults may believe they are too old to learn. People with low literacy may experience stigma and shame.

Poor Sensitisation about Adult Education: Many adults are unaware of the existence of adult education centres in the country or how the programmes are run. Moreover, there are private individuals and organisations that are willing to invest in this sector but are unable to do so due to a lack of proper advocacy and sensitisation. Okafor (2006) stated that “adult education programs are not receiving adequate coverage from the mass media, and the government has made

little to no effort in promoting these programs. Consequently, the publicity and recognition for adult education remains low". Good publicity creates awareness of a particular programme or venture. Ihejirika in Okirika (2023) noted that the combination of all channels of communication, such as print media, broadcast and electronic media, computers, and so on, has not been fully feasible, as the facilities are not functional or reliable. He observed that there are remote parts of the country where radio reception is poor, and that, due to commercial announcements and advertisements, the time allotted to educational radio broadcasts by the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria is limited. Ignorance of the tuning time for educational broadcasts among radio owners creates its own problems. Both television and newly imported cellular communications spearheaded by MTN, Econet, and E-mail are novel, expensive, and not within the reach of every Nigerian. Hence, there is a need to adopt appropriate communication strategies so that information reaches the masses, especially at the grassroots level. This will enhance the implementation of adult education programmes.

Strategies for Effective Implementation of Adult Education.

To effectively implement adult education, several key strategies can be employed. Ukwuaba (2015) and Ezimah in Okirika (2023) offered the following recommendations for effective implementation of adult education programmes.

- a) Professionals and trained educators should be utilised in managing all programs for adult education.
- b) Adequate human, material, and financial resources should be allocated for the successful execution of adult education programs.
- c) The mass media should be responsible for implementing effective communication strategies to promote awareness of adult education
- d) Professionals and trained adult educators should educate the people on what adult education stands for in order to change their wrong or negative perception of adult education.
- e) Facilitators should learn to incorporate methods of learning that prove effective in every learning situation.

In a nutshell, the future of adult education relies heavily on the current dedication of government entities, corporations, volunteer groups, and individuals to secure the necessary resources and establish the structures needed to provide adult education effectively within and beyond national borders. This, according to Ezimah in Okirika (2023), will include:

- i. A structural framework that will allow every provider to contribute individually while also promoting cooperative efforts for the collective benefit of the group.
- ii. Sufficient personnel resources.
- iii. Training and retraining facilities.
- iv. The active engagement of individuals in teaching.
- v. Material resources in sufficient quantity and of the right kind in the right place
- vi. The most thorough utilisation of all available methods of transmitting information and ideas.
- vii. Effective channels of feedback.
- viii. Application of realistic methods of evaluation.
- ix. Empowering learners to participate in the development and execution of programs actively

Prospects of Adult Education for Sustainable Development

Despite the challenges, the prospects of adult education hold immense promise as follows:

1. **Acquisition of New Skills and Knowledge:** One of the primary prospects of adult education for sustainable development in Nigeria is the opportunity it provides for individuals to upgrade their skills and knowledge continually. This enables them to adapt to changing economic and social conditions, thereby contributing to the country's overall development.
2. **Improvement in Health and Well-Being:** Adult education can also lead to improvements in health and well-being, as individuals are educated on issues such as sanitation, hygiene, and disease prevention.
3. **Promoting Environmentalism:** Adult education can have a positive impact on the environment and sustainable resource management in Nigeria. Educating adults about environmental issues and sustainable practices can help promote a more environmentally conscious society, leading to the preservation of natural resources and reduced environmental degradation (Kajuru, 2016).
4. **Implementation of Adult Education Programs Across the Country.** This could lead to greater access to education and a more educated, empowered population, ultimately benefiting the country's overall economic and social progress.

5. **Integration of Technology in Learning:** With the increasing reliance on technology in our daily lives, incorporating it into adult education programs can make learning more accessible and engaging (Okirika & Igoni, 2023). This could also lead to a more diverse and inclusive learning environment, promoting sustainable development in a more globalised world. With constant technological advancements and a changing job market, it is important for individuals to update their skills and knowledge continually. Adult education provides individuals with the opportunity to do so in a structured and supportive environment.
6. **Creating Partnerships with Governments, Non-Governmental Organisations, and Private Organisations:** This can also be a potential solution for the problem of adult education, for sustainable development. By working together, these entities can pool their resources and expertise to provide more comprehensive and effective adult education programs.
7. **Promoting Civic and Active Citizenship:** Adult education can also contribute to achieving sustainable development goals in Nigeria by promoting civic engagement and active citizenship. This is particularly important in a country like Nigeria, where democracy is still evolving and a more active, engaged citizenry is needed. Through adult education, individuals can develop critical thinking skills and gain a better understanding of their civic rights and responsibilities, thereby empowering them to participate actively in the development process.
8. **Poverty Alleviation:** Okirika (2024) noted that through empowering individuals with knowledge and skills, adult education can catalyze socio-economic growth and environmentally responsible practices in the country. By providing access to education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities, adult education can address key challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation, paving the way for a sustainable future for Nigeria.
9. **Bridging the Gap Between Formal Education and the Skills Required in the Labour Market:** With the rapid pace of technological advancement and globalisation, the demand for a skilled workforce has increased significantly. Adult education can help individuals acquire new skills and competencies aligned with the needs of the job market, thereby promoting economic growth and reducing unemployment.

However, Kpeno (2025) summarized new directions that are emerging that can strengthen adult learning systems and expand opportunities in millions of adults as “expansion of lifelong learning systems, digital and hybrid learning models, competency-based and skills-oriented education, community-centered learning and local development, green skills and sustainability education, personalized and self-directed learning, greater integration of mental health and well-being and stronger partnerships across sectors”.

Analysis

The manuscript provides a useful overview of the challenges and prospects of adult education in Nigeria. Its strongest feature is the identification of practical barriers affecting programme effectiveness, particularly inadequate funding, weak infrastructure, insufficient professional personnel and poor programme management. The discussion of emerging opportunities, especially technology, lifelong learning and stakeholder partnerships, gives the paper contemporary relevance. A major weakness is the predominantly descriptive treatment of the subject. The paper identifies many problems and prospects, but the relationships between these factors and sustainable development require deeper interpretation. Some sections also repeat similar ideas, which reduces analytical sharpness. The manuscript would be strengthened by prioritising the most significant challenges and explaining how addressing them can enhance adult education's contribution to sustainable development in Nigeria.

Discussion

The manuscript demonstrates that adult education is highly relevant to sustainable development in Nigeria. Its contribution depends heavily on the quality of programme implementation and the resources available to learners and educators. Persistent underfunding, inadequate facilities, and shortages of qualified personnel weaken programmes' capacity to achieve their intended outcomes. Socio-economic barriers also influence participation. Poverty, competing responsibilities, transportation difficulties and limited awareness can restrict access to adult learning opportunities. Flexible programmes, community involvement and appropriate technologies could improve participation and programme relevance. The prospects identified in the paper are significant because adult education can strengthen skills development, health awareness, environmental responsibility, civic participation and poverty reduction. However, these prospects require sustained institutional commitment. Increased investment, professional staffing, effective monitoring, relevant curricula and stronger stakeholder partnerships would provide a more reliable foundation for adult education to support sustainable development in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Adult education can help address social and economic inequalities by providing marginalised populations with access to education. It can lead to personal and professional growth, ultimately benefiting the country's overall development. However, to fully realise the potential of adult education for sustainable development in Nigeria, it is essential to address challenges such as limited funding, resource constraints, and cultural barriers. By investing in adult education and promoting inclusive, accessible learning opportunities, Nigeria can achieve sustainable development and pave the way for a prosperous future.

Suggestions

The following suggestions can help address several challenges and opportunities in the field of adult education for sustainable development in Nigeria:

1. The government should allocate more resources to the adult education sector. This will improve the quality of education and increase accessibility for adults
2. Curriculum should be developed to suit the needs of adult learners. This will ensure that the education provided is relevant and effective in addressing real-life challenges.
3. The government should invest in building and upgrading infrastructure to make education more accessible and conducive for adult learners
4. There should be involvement of various stakeholders, such as NGOs, private companies, and community organisations, to provide additional resources, expertise, and support for adult learners
5. Adult education programs should actively engage with local communities and raise awareness about the benefits of lifelong learning.

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