

# THE PLACE OF MASS LITERACY IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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## **Abstract**

Education has always been seen and conceived as an installment of liberation from ignorance, disease, superstitions belief and poverty. It is in this understanding that the author of the paper gave a highly simplified definition of literacy. Apart from highlighting the importance of literacy, the paper also discussed government involvement in the fight against illiteracy. The paper ended up by mentioning briefly some of the hurdles on our ways in the efforts to achieve mass literacy.

## **Introduction**

In its simplest definition, literacy means being able to read and write. Thus a literate person can be described as someone who knows how to read and write in his own language. According to Urevbu (1991) "a person is literate when he can with understanding read and write simple statements in his everyday life". On a higher level, however, the extended definition of literate means "an educated or enlightened person". It can also be used to refer to a person who is well read and knowledgeable about many subjects. It is to the level of this kind of literacy that our Nigerian government aims to educate its citizens. As a matter of fact, when the citizens of a country are educated, the quality of its manpower is greatly improved upon. The economy is correspondingly strengthened and so the general quality of life gets better. The whole nation benefits if the society is literate. Literacy gives access to knowledge and understanding on the level of you, your country and the world.

## **Why Education is Important to National Development**

Education as a key to national development should, help to select individuals into vocations or professions they are best suitable for. The school system helps to determine those that should be teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers and accountants etc. (Onwueme and Ugbor, 1994). To Urevbu (1991) education should help to strengthen:

- (a) Faith and belief in the Nigerian culture.
- (b) The desire to live democratically.
- (c) Faith and respect for the Nigerian constitution.
- (d) Knowledge of the rights of every citizen.
- (e) Ability to use essential skills and knowledge effectively.

Education makes adaptation to a changing environment possible. There are a number of attitudes and ideas common in our environment which basic education could help to change and whose alteration would promote national development. Among these are:

- i) Attitude to work.
- ii) Prejudice about savings and investment and about insurance,
- iii) Toleration of bribery and corruption,
- iv) Attitudes to the education of girls and women,
- v) Narrow ethnic or tribal attachment,
- vi) Age long customs,
- vii) Old habits and ways of life.

The five principal objectives of the National Development Plan were to create;

- ✓ A united, strong and self-reliant nation;
- ✓ A great and dynamic economy;
- ✓ A just and egalitarian society;

- ✓ A land of bright and full opportunity for all citizens;
- ✓ A free and democratic nation.

These are the aims of an educated nation. Raising the national standards of the economy is a challenge to all Nigerians. It is said that education in its broadest sense is the foundation of a nation. Can we afford to stand by and see a large portion of our population unable to contribute to our national aims because of lack of an opportunity to get enough basic learning that will enable them to understand that they have a contribution to make?

It has been the tendency in many countries to pay a great deal of attention to the development of natural resources and pay insufficient attention to the development of human resources. Luckily for us here in Nigeria, government has recognized this mistake and wants to avoid it. We have in the past depended on foreign countries for our skilled labour but this is certainly not the path to a strong and self-reliant nation. It is generally recognized that literacy is the foundation for all development plans.

Let us examine the five national objectives of the Second National Development Plan more closely in order to discover the importance of literacy.

If we consider the first objective, we can see that the nation cannot be socially or politically united when there are great differences and inequalities in education between one part and the other. The nation cannot be strong when a great majority of its citizens live in ignorance in these days when knowledge means strength and power. No nation can claim to be self-reliant either, until it can realize and make use of its own potentialities. No economy can be great and dynamic until there is enough high level and intermediate manpower to direct a disciplined and responsible labour force. All these three levels of manpower are products of education and training.

Now let us try to look at the other countries of the world in order to see the connection between education and economic growth in relation to the second objective under discussion.

Denmark, for example, was notably a peasant country in the last quarter of the nineteenth century because her people were mostly peasant farmers. In 1914, education was made compulsory for all children and at the same time, there was a large investment in adult education whereby farmers and rural youths who had missed the opportunity of formal education could learn from special adult education institutions called "folk high school". There were also vocational and agrarian schools. Today, Denmark counts as one of the world's greatest exporters of agricultural products and has one of the highest standards of living in the world. Thus, she has been able to prove that education helps to produce highly skilled farmers who are the principal source of agricultural growth. In Denmark, literacy also helped the formation of co-operative societies devoted to the practice and improvement of farming.

Another example is Israel where rapid agricultural growth took place in the 1950s as a result of similar encouragement given to mass literacy. The most remarkable achievement was recorded in dairy and poultry farming, both of which required a high level of skill and knowledge.

What has been said about Denmark and Israel does not mean economic growth is realized only through agricultural development. Japan and Germany are known to have invested a lot of money on adult education and scientific research in addition to the system of formal education. Today these two countries count among the richest in the world.

Coming back to our objectives, if we take justice and the dignity of man referred to in the third national objectives we will find that they are best upheld in an enlightened community, that is, a community where no citizen is above the law, where justice is neither sold to nor bought by the citizen. According to the Second National Development Plan, a just and egalitarian society puts a premium on reducing inequalities in interpersonal incomes and promoting balanced development among the various communities in the different geographical areas in the country. It organizes its institutions in such a way that there is no oppression based on class, social status, ethnic group, state etc.

That is a noble objective but it will not be easy to uphold in a country when citizens are not aware of their rights.

Turning to the next national objective, we all agree that Nigeria is a land of bright sunshine, fertile soil and colourful surroundings. Certainly abound in opportunities. But can these bright and full opportunities in the country be taken advantage of and made full use of if the masses of the people are not literate? Human

resources are expected to be well educated before they can develop and exploit the natural resources.

Referring to the fifth and last objectives, let us examine Nigeria since independence particularly during the civilian regime. An educated minority was actually running Nigeria-supposedly a free and democratic country. This could never have happened in a society where the masses were educated. The free and democratic Nigeria we worked for is that where elections will be free and fair, where voters will neither be bought nor sold, where every adult citizen in the country will have the right to vote. These will only be possible in an enlightened society. It will be a mere waste of time for the political elite in the country to continue to call for modernization. Nigerianization and modernization of the creative energies of the people when the masses live in ignorance and cannot participate intellectually in public affairs. Cuba and China are able to stand firm in defence of their national interests, because the masses of the people know what their government are fighting for and are standing solidly behind them.

Looking through these five national objectives one again, we can easily conclude that education is the most important tool for building the country (Nigeria) we all hope to see. It contributes generally to the progress of a nation.

### **The Fight Against Illiteracy in Nigeria**

The battle against illiteracy is now new in Nigeria. The first region in Nigeria to take up this campaign with vigour was the defunct Western Region in under late Chief Obafemi Awolowo. In 1955 late Chief Obafemi Awolowo introduced a free primary education scheme throughout the region for all children of school age. Thus many children from poor families were able to receive primary education. The Eastern Region made primary education free in 1857 but abandoned it the following year because of lack of funds.

In the more recent years, Universal ^Primary Education (UPE) was introduced in September 1976 by President Olusegun Obasanjo when he was the military Head of State of the Republic of Nigeria. This scheme made free primary education available to all children of school age in Nigeria. It was hoped that UPE will go a long way to eradicate illiteracy from among our people since it was organized on a national level and the then Federal Military Government assumed full responsibility for it.

Adult education is also the concern of government and work is being done to eradicate illiteracy among adults. The missionaries laid the foundation of adult education in Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century even before the British rule began. However, during colonial rule, emphasis was mainly placed on the education of children specifically for the needs and purposes of government, commerce and the church and so adult education was neglected. But the effects of the Second World War in 1942 and the exposure of educated Nigerians to the Western European ways of life brought the re-establishment of adult education in Nigeria in 1943. Unfortunately, it was not carried out on a large scale because political consideration and the types of programme the colonial masters were operating in Nigeria influenced the trend of development. Although a Mass Education Officer was appointed in 1946 to co-ordinate an Adult Education programme; there was still lack of central direction because the prevailing constitution gave the three regions the power to direct their own education (Olawole, 1982). In the course of time, adult education became the exclusive affair of the Regions, which were too pre-occupied with other pressing problems to be concerned with the matter. This resulted in further neglect of adult education. The situation continued even after independence. However, the creation of states in 1967 gave a new impetus to adult education in Nigeria.

Adult education and literacy centres now exist throughout the country and there is an Adult Education Division in the Ministry of Education in each state. There are also Local Committees on adult education. The publication of vernacular literature and the establishment of village libraries financed by the government are also giving a boost to adult education.

### **Problems Facing Mass Literacy in Nigeria**

One of the problems encountered is the existence of so many languages and dialects in the country, which made the adoption of a common language difficult. Other problems are the remote and scattered villages and the presence of the nomads in the North and the migrant fishermen in the South. Again we have the problem of manpower. We have not enough teachers or even classrooms.

The greatest difficulty of all is the tendency by government to neglect the area of adult education. We have seen how this important area has been neglected all through our recent history.

## **The Meaning of National Development**

National Development may be defined as the plan usually initiated by the government for the economic, social and political development- of a nation. In the view of many people, the term is synonymous with economic development, which implies the establishment of an economy in which productivity is high and the national per capita income is also high. Widespread mechanization and the production of material goods and services in greater profusion are viewed by such people as the only yardsticks for measuring national development. But national development means much more than this: unity stability, health services, educational opportunities, egalitarianism, personal freedom and social services are only a few of the non-economic aspects of a national development. For a country to develop, there must be a national plan. It is in this ground that Koinyan (1991) defined development as "a scheme of work laid out before hand, and in a logical sequence, to achieve the purpose of development as agreed to by a people, by a community or by a nation".

## **Solution for True Development**

Since every community would very much want to be developed, the question as to why plan for development will no longer pose a major problem. However, one is not too sure that there is general agreement on what should constitute true development since, it is development we wish to plan for, we need to achieve some common understanding of what it could mean and why we need to really plan for it. For development to qualify as true development, it must be all round, well balanced, progressive and self-sustaining; that all individual aspects must be mutually reinforcing; that development has to be multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional and that all these aspects must be effectively integrated. The development is much more than provision of facilities, educational and health facilities etc. That development must include the exploitation of all available resources for the maximum good: vast improvement in our self-reliance and self assurance in our creativity and managerial ability, in our productivity and production, particularly of the goods and services needed by the majority to improve the quality of their lives. That development must include vast and rapid quantitative improvement in our individual and collective security and well-being.

## **Conclusion**

Development must include urgent installation of a progressively more democratic, egalitarian, civil and civilized society. That for development to qualify as true development, it must have solid foundation in the nation's communities, it must be that type of development that meets the needs of the present generation of Nigerians without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. We must be able to hand down to successive generations not only man-made wealth but also natural wealth like water, soil, plants and animals in sufficient amounts to allow for a continuing improvement of the quality of life.

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