

# FUNCTIONAL ADULT LITERACY AS A STRATEGY FOR ATTAINING SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*All adults in any given nation (both developed and developing) are expected to carry-out certain responsibilities which certainly differentiate them from children or adolescents and endow them with much honour, respect, and security. Literacy education equips populace particularly adults to participate, with understanding in the administration of their own affairs and with success in their economic, social, cultural and political advancement. Today, one of the major challenges facing literacy education in Nigeria is the non-incorporation of functional adult literacy in adult population to facilitate and ensure their potential in political participation in governance. There appears to be an increasing apathy among the populace to demand a responsive and accountable leadership as expected in democratic parlance. This paper therefore, discusses the relevance of functional adult literacy, the culture of democracy as promoted by functional literacy, sustainable democracy.*

**Key words:** Functional, Adult literacy, Sustainable, Democracy

## **Introduction**

Globally, the usefulness of functional adult literacy in enhancing development of democracy cannot be overemphasized. It's has been an area of concern by several governments in developing countries particularly in Nigeria. Understanding the need for a literate society for improved democracy is inevitable.

In a general term, when we talk about literacy, we refer to the ability to read, write and do elementary numerical calculations. But there is an inherent complexity to this. Reading the words in a document is not enough. There is a requirement to understand the arguments, the turns of phrase and the allusions. Problems have to be solved, the implications of calculations assessed and arguments put forward in the active everyday use of literacy.

It becomes imperative for active political participation among the adult population in today, Nigeria; finding effective ways to teach these adults to achieve this all-important objective is perhaps one of the greatest challenges currently facing literacy education in Nigeria (Ekanola, 2006). This implies that literacy education should be given the utmost attention it deserves as it enhances the development of academic that arouse and maintain political participation and social inclusiveness among the adult populace of Nigeria.

The Nigerian society is characterised by mass poverty, unemployment, bad road network, decreasing living standard, socio-economic, inequality, insecurity, and among others. In improving the system, it requires the active participation of all, especially the adult population. This implies that the active participation of people in governance is premised on the literacy level of the people. The implication is that where people are largely non-literate, they will no doubt be inactive participants in the democratic process of their communities/societies.

Consequently, the impact of functional adult literacy on political empowerment cannot be overemphasized. Literacy gives people access to information through both print and

electronic media, enable them to cope better with work, family and societal responsibilities which in turns change their mind set of themselves. It is an indispensable tool for disadvantaged people to move from exclusion to full participation within the society they belong.

According to Adamu (2018) where education in general and functional literacy in particular are lacking, people can hardly be empowered politically and economically. In a situation where large numbers of children are non-literate, the tendency is that unproductive adult life will be imminent, unless there is immediate and adequate intervention.

However, it will be interesting to note that literacy has gone beyond the ability to read, write and possibly understanding numeracy but it is the inevitable foundation for most of the other typologies of literacy. This implies that literacy is tailored towards the general aspects of one's life in the realm of the social, economic, cultural, and political domain. Sequel to dynamic nature of the world, it will be current and fashionable to talk of technological, mathematical, environmental and AIDs literacies, among others Akinpelu (2002).

According to UNESCO institute (2020), functional literacy refers to capacity of a person to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his/her group and community and also for enabling him her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his/her own the community development. More so, functional literacy refers to the practical skill set needed to read, write and do math for real-life purposes, so that people can be functional and productive (<https://mindtechnics.com>>what)

According to Akinpelu (2009) literacy is seen as lifelong learning in which its skills are acquired permanently and functionally. Therefore, literacy skills should be transferable to all activities or situations in which literacy is required for effective functioning in a person's community. The implication of the above is that literacy is a matter of functionality in any situation or condition an individual finds him or herself. Literacy is a set of skills that are learnt and acquired by each person at a particular age. Literacy is not hereditary. It does not exist as a latent. It needs to be demonstrated, since outward appearance is not enough as an evidence to justify that one is literate or non-literate.

Literacy as perceived by Brown (2009) is a continuum of learning meant to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge base and potential, and participate fully in the wider society. It will therefore, be established that literacy is for human resource development and one of the most important components in the area of adult and non-formal education. With increase in education, functional literacy level also increases. Functional literacy will thus make it possible for people to be involved in those activities of the community/society they belong to better their living standard and the society.

The establishment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a nascent development with a vision of 2030, was inaugurated majorly to enhance education and functional literacy development. In this new set of goals, under target 4.4, the goal is to cater for the provision of relevant skills for decent work and employment (Patrick, 2018). Patrick stated that the adoption of Education for All (EFA) goals made Nigeria place much emphasis on adult and non-formal education in the 2004 National Policy on Education. Arising from this are other innovations/interventions by the Nigerian government in connection with literacy promotion which gave birth to National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education charged with responsibilities of adult literacy activities across the country.

Consequently, Nigeria became a formally independent federation on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960. It experienced a civil war from 1967 to 1970, followed by succession of military dictatorships and democratically elected civilian governments until achieving a stable democracy in the 1999 presidential election (W <https://in.m.wikipedia.org>>wiki)

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nigeria has witnessed tremendous expansion of democracy and today it is gradually taking its root, after many years of military rule. Sequel to the above, 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1999, a democratically-elected government was sworn in, marking a return to democracy after it was truncated in 1983. Democracy Day marks the day the military handed over power to an elected civilian government in 1999, marking the beginning of the longest continuous civilian rule since Nigeria's independence from colonial rule in 1960. This has led to declaration of 29<sup>th</sup> May of every year as democracy day but recently it has been shifted by Buhari's led administration in 2019 to 12<sup>th</sup> June of every year to commensurate the annulled 12<sup>th</sup> June presidential election of 1983 by Babangida led administration. Consequently, democracy in Nigeria can be described as nascent, need to be nurtured and be refined towards enhancing the participation of all eligible Nigerians.

Democracy as a system of government has been characterised with four major key elements:

- i. A system for choosing and replacing the government through free, fair and credible elections;
- ii. Active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life;
- iii. Protection of the human rights of all citizens; and
- iv. A rule of law in the country.

Governance is considered to be good if it is participatory, transparent and accountable, as well as being effective and equitable in promoting the rule of law. Good governance ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poor and vulnerable are heard in decision-making, especially over the allocation of development resources.

The active participation of people in governance is premised on their literacy level. Where people lack literacy, they become inactive participants in democratic process. The connection between literacy and political engagement is predicated on the assumption that as individuals become more exposed to information about their environment, especially on public institutions and government, they become more prepared to make such bodies more responsive to their needs. There is the expectation also that as individuals is engaged in political decisions about different aspects of life, an intimate connection develops between such exposure and participation in democratic process.

Consequently, the concerns of Nigerians are not so much about the nascence of the nation's democracy but full thought on how the system will work in a way that delivers and sustains the dividends of democracy. Therefore, attaining an ideal democratic society and good governance requires that the adult population of the country attains a reasonable level of literacy skills; this would assist them to champion the cause of good governance. This implies that adult literacy has essential roles to play in the pursuit of sustainable democratic society and good governance in Nigeria.

### **Relevance of Functional Adult Literacy**

It is one thing to be able to read, write and to do sums. It is quite another to apply these concepts perceptively in a complex, changing technological world. This is what we mean by functional literacy.

The UNESCO General Conference uses this definition of functional literacy:

*“A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development.”*

Functional adult literacy remains central to all development efforts. The major problem facing Nigeria are hunger, poverty, unemployment and underemployment. The solution lies in adult education since when people are functional literate, they will think of

being self-reliant and thus make a living that will lift them above poverty level as it is one of the major objectives of the Nigeria National Development plans to build a united, strong and self-reliant nation. Consequently, it should be noted that most of the UNESCO's literacy programmes are tailored towards making all the participants/beneficiaries more functional in the society they belong. Basically, literacy activities are tailored towards creating an enabling environment for man to realise his full potential, it is equally accepted to be a functional-oriented literacy programme, such as National Directorate of Employment (NDE), youth empowerment programmes, and among others.

According to Biao (2011), functional literacy is that type of literacy, which enables a person to function within his society while such person needs to master the medium and means of communication most commonly used. It is the last and most complex level of literacy – proficient functional literacy as the only alternative for attainment of sustainable democracy and the general development of any nation particularly developing countries. The 21<sup>st</sup> century economy demands highly skilled workers with knowledge in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. We can justifiably say that functional literacy is essential for a functional society.

Functional literacy is about developing and enhancing the individual acquired skills to make society functional. If we don't have individuals with mathematical knowledge, reading and writing skills, or analytical abilities, we cannot have functioning communities, businesses, or governments. But functional literacy is not just reading, writing and arithmetic lumped together. We can highlight a number of literacies which help to make up a functional society.

- Civic Literacy- understanding how government works and the rights and responsibilities of a citizen and voter.
  - Computer Literacy – the ability to use computers. This skill set can range from using applications like email, word processors and spreadsheets to advanced knowledge about programming and computer science. We also have to contend with digital literacy, information literacy and data literacy.
  - Financial Literacy – manage finances and make decisions about money.
  - Health Literacy – make lifestyle choices about nutrition, exercise, sleep, and other factors that affect physical and mental well-being.
  - Legal Literacy- interpret legislation, contracts and legal procedures.
  - Media Literacy – access, evaluate, and create messages through different types of media. To be a thoughtful citizen who isn't susceptible to propaganda or advertising.
- Scientific Literacy -able to support or contradict preconceived beliefs or hypotheses using factual evidence.

The list above is not comprehensive. But we will immediately see that functional literacy is very different to and much more complex than traditional literacy prior to this time. Functional literacy in the current dynamic world is not necessarily being able to code. It is about understanding what coding is, how these technologies work and being able to integrate them into daily life. This is why adequate functional literacy is essential for playing a role in our current high-tech society.

Functional literacy is not static, as the needs change, so the literacy demands change. We are on the continual treadmill of catch-up to enable us to be competent, robust contributors to our society. In the 1980s we used devices for spreadsheets and word-processing, and we thought that was pretty good! Now we use our devices for email, browsers, entertainment centres and online meetings. And this is just the simple stuff, we aren't talking about coding and simulations. The level of literacy demanded in our times is ever-changing. Consequently, there are other literacy proficiencies required from all of us to operate effectively in the ever-changing world.

Ethical literacy is the ability to apply beliefs and principles of right or wrong in human interactions. These beliefs intersect with value systems, religious views, legal systems, philosophies, social conventions and moral codes. An ethically literate person is able to reflect, analyse and reason about moral issues and dilemmas and, more importantly, behave and act in a morally appropriate manner. Ethical literacy has an important role to play in the use and interpretation of data and the responsible use of social media. A great deal of personal data is harvested and stored from online interactions, and organisations and decision-makers must have a sound ethical base to govern how they use this very sensitive data.

And then there is a cluster of very important skills, which cut across the categories above, but which are essential for functioning in a modern business environment and democratic setting.

We have to exercise judgement when we use, interpret and validate internet platforms, social media, and mobile devices. We need an extraordinary type of critical thinking skill when we are confronted with the barrage of information in different formats and presentations on the internet. We have to be able to search, sift, evaluate, collate, apply, summarise and produce information, all of which require us to think critically.

We require a distinct functional proficiency when communicating in virtual environments, the ability to clearly express our ideas, ask relevant questions, maintain respect, and build trust when we are not communicating in person.

We also need the “tech-smarts” – practical skills in technology to access, manage, manipulate and create information in an ethical and sustainable way – it’s a continual learning process.

According to Ani (2010), functional literacy is a combination of literacy skills of reading, writing, and numeracy, with socio-economic or work- oriented skills. It is the application of literacy acquired to the improvement of daily living, health care, hygiene, farming, or trading.

However, it will be established that functional literacy is one of the scopes of adult and non-formal education concerned with acquiring skills which might be of use to people immediately and throughout life. It is also assisting the youth to be less dependent on older people to solve their problems. Therefore, it is an area in adult education that makes the recipients gain knowledge, self-reliance, and improve their living standard.

The functional literacies discussed above are really important in the professional world. In just about every workplace, we are required to interact with people in digital environments, use information in appropriate ways, and create new ideas and products collaboratively. We need to maintain our identity and wellbeing as the functional adult literacy continues to change our dynamic world.

### **Culture of Democracy as Promoted by Functional Adult Literacy**

Ironically and unfortunately, Nigeria, as far as the practice and delivery of dividends of liberal democracy is concerned, is yet a cripple that can barely stand let alone walk or run. Nigerian democracy is a brand of democracy that spends so much to accomplish so little (where and when it achieves anything at all); It invests in the comfort of officials rather than in human and material resources.

In fact, the welfare of the common man occupies the bottom rung on the ladder of the priorities of the anchors of Nigerian democracy; Nigerian democracy is plagued by hydra-headed and pathological corruption that ensures that the impact of any seeming good policy is either extremely negligible or almost exactly nil. While it remains true that Nigeria is governed by democratically elected leaders at the federal and state levels, Nigeria is yet to institutionalise democracy after a century of existence as a political entity.

However, the balance sheet of democracy in Nigeria may be less than satisfactory; all hope is not lost as the desire for the practice of true democracy amongst Nigerians remains unassailably high.

Functional adult literacy has been identified and perceived for its complexities, the national policy on education in Nigeria and constitution ascribed its functionality to the country's democratic situation since independence. Its democracy, a social mechanism for solving the problems of societal decision making among conflicting interest groups tied to literacy, participation and education of the adults should be accorded a critical focus and situationally taken care of.

This important factor in a democratic setting of Nigeria has not been given adequate attention like that of the youth. It is in the light of this, that functional literacy is seen as forms of adult literacy education programmes which serve as agents of Nigerian transformational democracy in terms of equity and poverty reduction.

Adult education is now widely recognised as an important aspect of citizenship in any democratized nation like Nigeria due to the roles played by its various forms in the national development of the society. It is a vital aspect of Nigerian National Policy on Education that views it as a medium of generating qualities of good citizenship and involving all (actively) in the national development process.

Functional Adult Literacy becomes imperative for people seeking to take part in public life (Brown, 2009). He further posited that literacy is not a state but a process and that there are many types of literacy depending on the learners' context, whether in the home, local community, market, workplace, religious institution, or in local, regional or national polity.

Consequently, there are adult literacy programmes that focus on the development of citizenship and autonomous attitudes of the participants/beneficiaries.

Functional adult literacy could be seen as a competent educational programme that could assist in arresting the multifaceted challenges militating against Nigeria's nascent democracy. This is to say that functional adult literacy is the essential tool that would assist in achieving good governance. Thus, adult literacy is born out of desire to ensure quality education that would be adapted to learners in a context of democracy and empowerment. It aims to empower people to claim their rights, culture, and civilization so as to enable people masters over their destiny. It enhances the possibilities of people to become more critical about their social, political and economic development and the society they belong. Therefore, it assists to liberate the masses, the marginalized, the deprived and the voiceless.

More so, an adult who is functionally literate will surely acquire civic literacy that makes him function appropriately in achieving his/her civic rights. Functional literacy gives needed information and learning experience to citizens in participating effectively in democratic processes of their society. In a nut shell, literacy is aimed at promoting civic engagement and support democratic and participatory governance which encompasses civic knowledge, skills and disposition (Murtala, 2015). Therefore, the relevance of adult literacy in national development cannot be over-emphasized due to the fact that in attaining democratic and good governance in Nigeria lies in changing the orientation of both the leaders and the led through adequate and functional adult literacy programmes.

It should be noted that the social change brought about by literacy particularly functional adult literacy includes such areas as policies, economy, politics (Democracy) and all facets of human lives. The implication is that no nation can eradicate ignorance, social injustice, poor sanitation, poverty, and political dogmatism as long as literacy is not made a priority.

According to Mbalisi and Ugwu (2015), the relevance of adult literacy to national development lies on the participation of greater number of people with the sole aim of

acquiring skills that enable them to participate in the development of the various dimensions of national development particularly in the nascent democracy.

### **Sustainable Democracy**

According to Akanbi (2010), sustainable development is a broad term used and applied to various field of knowledge. As a concept, its malleability allows it to remain an open, dynamic and evolving idea that can adapt to fit every different situation and context across space and time. Sustainable can equally mean the standard, stability level of any life, which can enhance our nation the desired development at all levels.

Sustainable is also the ability to meet the needs of the present generation particularly the Nigeria's nascent democracy should be tailored towards overall gradual process of growth that will enhance overall national development and the individuals.

It has been observed that a vital factor in the realisation of sustainable democracy which has continued to elude country (Nigeria) is the provision of effective functional adult literacy programme that can prepare the citizens for the enthronement of effective democratic culture. This is particularly true for Nigeria that is a nation of ethnic nationalities with diverse culture, political systems and where the majority are non-literates.

Majority of Nigerians are of the view that the various attempts at the installation of political democracy since the nation's independence have failed as a result of our inability to provide viable functional adult literacy programme that will eradicate non-literacy and drastically minimize poverty which have become significant factors against political stability in Nigeria.

According to Aboyi (2014), in Nigeria like in the majority of African countries, the imbalance in the distribution of the national wealth has created a large pool of poor citizens who are exposed to the manipulation of the minority who control the larger proportion of the national wealth. This is a serious constraint to the sustainability of a true democratic culture. A condition for the smooth installation of the democratic system particularly in any developing nation such as Nigeria is the implementation of a functional literacy programme. This is sequel to the fact that appropriate literacy is an indispensable tool through which the people can be made to become conscious of their rights and responsibilities in the community they belong.

All the countries of the world that have established appropriate literacy programmes have equally been able to instilled effective democratic culture. For Nigeria as a highly pluralistic society the role of appropriate literacy programmes in the enthronement of a sustainable democratic culture is of great importance.

The government at various level recognise that a literate citizenry is vital in the attainment and sustenance of political stability. It implies that literacy is the only sure means through which a pluralistic country can achieve any meaningful national development and peaceful coexistence. It is recognised that literacy education is a veritable factor in the transmission of democratic values including dialogue, national unity, patriotism and self-reliance which are vital for the realisation of sustainable development in Nigeria.

The corporate existence of Nigeria is currently threatened by ethnic conflicts and terrorism which are largely politically motivated. In the opinion of Omachi (2012), this super-imposition of ethnic loyalty over national loyalty is largely responsible for the current situation in Nigeria. This state of fair certainly does not make for the attainment of sustainable democracy. In most crises in Nigeria could be attributed to the high level of non-literate adults and unemployed youths that have taken thuggery as available opportunity are equipped to fight political opponents. The high levels of non-literacy among the adults and youths as well as the alarming poverty in the country provide Nigerian politicians ready hands to engage for their undemocratic practices.

Functional adult literacy has remained a pivotal for sustainable democracy as well as sustainable national development. However, to achieve all this important goal, it must be tailored towards making the beneficiaries functional and be self-reliant. The Nigerian government appears to be paying lip-service to the provision of appropriate education in general and functional adult literacy as can be observed from slim budgetary allocation to education and specifically adult literacy which has hinder educational development.

Although many definitions of democracy abound in theory and practice, the one universally accepted is that advanced by Abraham Lincoln, which says that democracy is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people. The abiding principle of a democratic government is majority rule, one in which supreme power is held by the people under a free and fair electoral system. In a real democracy, the people possess the constitutionally guaranteed right to choose who rules over them at any given point in time.

There are roadblocks to a strong democracy in Nigeria at all levels of government. Conflict - triggered by political competition and communal, ethnic, religious or resource allocation rivalries - poses a major threat to democracy. Corruption pervades the daily lives of Nigerians. Many government institutions do not adequately engage with citizens or the private sector and lack the capacity to carry out their mandates. Further, civil society lacks both the capacity and the resources to effectively engage with government and advocate for change. Although elites dominate the political structure, civil society organizations are becoming a voice for democratic reform. Their efforts to push for inclusive governance have been successful in many ways, but they lack the capacity and resources to carry out their functions fully. (<https://peo.gov.au> › system-of-government › democracy)

United State Agency for International Development (USAID) works directly with a diverse representation of Nigerian civil society and media organizations, building their internal management capacity and strengthening their ability to engage with the government on issues of fiscal accountability, budget monitoring and transparency within extractive industries. Consequently, to achieve sustainable democracy, we must understand that there is more to democracy than elections and voting. The fact that a nation chooses her leaders through the ballot box does not necessarily translate to democracy. There are certain tenets upon which any democracy can be nurtured and sustained. These are sovereignty of the people, majority rule and minority rights, the rule of law and good governance, respect for civil and political rights, mass literacy, economic prosperity, social development, free press, and an independent judiciary. Sustainable democracy is attainable when the conditions listed above are prevalent.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the discourse, it will be established that in attaining sustainable democracy in Nigeria, it solely hinges on the changes of people's orientation via functional adult literacy. This is sequel to its importance as literacy equips the beneficiaries with understanding in the administration of their own affairs and with success in their economic, social, cultural and political advancement. There is however no perfect democracy anywhere in the world, today Nigeria is faced with numerous political, security and economic challenges which is an indicator that its governance is unsatisfactory. This is evident in the high level of poverty, corruption, kidnapping, bad road networking, hunger, and among others are experienced across the country (Nigeria). Therefore, it becomes imperative to raise efforts towards provision of adequate functional adult literacy and equally motivate citizenry's participation if national development and sustainability of the nascent democracy must be achieved.



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