# LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT AND THE IMPERATIVE OF COMMUNICATION SUPPORT

By

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**Abstract**
*The paper attempts to situate the case of literacy in Nigeria today and its implication for development. The paper also tries to show the importance of literacy to the development of the individual and the society. In this instance, it reviews how the media can be useful means in mobilizing peopie for literacy and also in providing them useful information and skills that \vitt enable them cope and survive in the 21st century.*

## Introduction

It has since been generally accepted that literacy is a pre-requisite for development. As early as the mid-fifties of the twentieth century, communication scholars have posited that for any country to embark on the road to real development, it must attain a minimum 50% threshold level of literacy (Lerner, 1964).

Conversely, it is also generally accepted that literacy also has value both for the individual, his family and nation. As Hoyles (1981) observe, it would seem that the more literate people are; the more willing they are to accept and work for improvements in their societies (p. 51).
Lerner (1964) also observes that one of the attributes or gains of literacy is the capacity for "empathy" that is the capacity to put one-self into the shoes of another; literacy also manifests as a significant indicator of flexibility, broadness of interest, willingness to accept change and innovate.

So, if literacy has so much positive benefits forthe individual and his/her society, why has it become so un-attractive in our society?
In responding to this, one could quickly quote Hoyles (1981) when he asserts that "any pressure to promote literacy should usually accompany some larger purpose: literacy would be for something." He also avers that the presence and utilization of literacy depends on the nature of the society in question.

Using these two ideas as our starting point, how relevant are these as factors in understanding the state of literacy in Nigeria today?
The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) (2011) noted that 70.0% among men and 50.4% among women Nigerians are literate, giving a national average of 60.4 %. In spite of these encouraging figures, Nigeria continues to be a member of the E-9 Group, countries that have illiteracy population in many millions.
Literacy education is at low ebb in the country today. The enthusiasm, the high-hopes of the 80s and 90s of the last century seemed to have waned. Especially, in the last few years of civilian

rule, literacy and adult education seemed to have taken a back seat. The professionals, organizers, instructors, appeared abandoned and frustrated.
According to the UNICEF document, "Children's and Women's Rights -A Wake - Up Call," (2001) - data from the beginning of the 1990s to its end revealed that "there was no progress in reducing either male or female illiteracy (p. 142). The document also identifies continuing disparity between urban and rural areas, between male and female and between the different zones of the country.

The former Head of State, Chief Earnest Shonekan also expressed concern about the state of literacy education in the country and the implication of this for national development.
According to Shonekan (2000), the role of literacy in development cannot be over-emphasized as

> It has been increasingly recognized that there is a significant correlation between literacy, sustainable development and progress, reduction and elimination of poverty, malnutrition, disease, equalor, un-employment and in-equities.

With the launching of the Universal Basic Education in (UBE) 1999, there were high hopes that literacy and primary education would have a new lease of life. This optimism was anchored on the stated objectives of the project. However, it is now clear that the focus and interest of government in the Universal Basic Education is limited to primary education.

So, what went wrong? Why the un-explained exclusion of adult literacy in the programme? The answer is not far-fetched. UBE is not an initiative of the federal government, rather, it is part of the directives and requirements of the World Bank, to enable them assist Nigeria.

The World Bank, while acknowledging the relevance and value of literacy, where "literate people were able to follow instructions, run machines, innovate and take risks", it nevertheless insist that "primary education is the route to literacy." It emphatically states that "support for basic primary education will be the dominant route" (King, 1991).

One of the disincentives to adult interest in literacy is their expectations from the programme. If people see literacy as a means of getting government or other salaried job, they would show interest, but if there are no opportunities for employment after obtaining literacy, then; there is no hope for participation. Therefore, the challenge is to encourage adults to see literacy as a means of empowerment to enable them stand on their own. Towards this end, some donor agencies are beginning to think that it might be more attractive and useful, to deliver some improvement in agriculture, income generation or rural development, which may come along with literacy.

The German government and the main German Aid Agency, IIZ/DW appears to have been actively involved in this approach in different parts of the developing world.

The attitude of the Nigerian government in focusing attention to primary and secondary education appears to have been conditioned by the World Bank, based, obviously on the experience of the 'Asian Tigers'.

In one of its publications, "The East Asian Miracle - Economic Growth and Public Policy" (1003) the Bank believed especially in the importance of primary education in enhancing national development. According to the Bank, "emphasis on universal, high-quality primary education had important pay-offs for economic efficiency and for equity" (p. 203). It also notes that the share of public expenditure on education allocated to basic education, has been consistently higher in East Asia than elsewhere. This eulogy of the focus on primary education is being touted as the basis for their economic "miracle.", hence seen as worthy of emulation by other developing countries anxious for the type of economic achievement of the East Asian nations. This position of course ignores the particularities of other nations and other intervening factors which might not have been present in those countries.

We are all aware of the state of primary education in Nigeria today. In spite of funding from the World Bank and the counterpart contribution from state governments, the country is yet to see any qualitative improvement in primary education. Primary school enrolment is still much below the expected target in the Millennium Development Goals declaration.

While the country neglects the adult illiterates, it is unable to capture and enroll significant number of children of school age. More disturbing is the quality of those who managed to complete primary education, many of who could hardly write their own names, let alone being able to write or read simple messages, even in their mother-tongue.

According to UNESCO source cited earlier, in the matter of primary school enrolment, the figures are not inspiring. If we consider all the different programmes - EFA, UBE and other campaigns aimed at enhancing primary school enrolment, the figures available are not encouraging.

The critical issue of what children acquire through primary education is also of international concern. According to King (1991), the quality aspects of schooling -what students learn and the usefulness of what they learn - remain a serious problem. This is as much a problem of adult literacy ... King (1991) notes that the question of learning achievement has reached a crisis proportion in many countries, where "children are virtually illiterate after four or five years of primary school attendance."

The dwindling fortune of adult education is not peculiar to Nigeria. Amutabi quoted an editorial in the influential, Kenyan newspaper, *The Daily Nation,* titled "We are losing the illiteracy fight," on 8th July, 1996.

The editorial states that "the national adult literacy programme is dying a gradual and painful death." Amutabi put the blame for this neglect of adult education on the international agencies. He notes that as long as adult education is regarded in a marginal way by the international agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), (which) in turn "pressurizes governments to abandon commitments to adult education and other social services, the situation will remain bleak."

Bhola (2001) shares similar sentiment. According to him, donors decide and donors have decided that "developing countries should focus on primary education and not allocate resources to adult education, which according to them, ‘does not bring economic returns’ (p. 259).

**Literacy and Development**

Literacy, whether at the level of primary education or for adults, is seen as prerequisite for development. The recognition of what literacy can do in enhancing development at the personal, community and national level makes it imperative that all segments of the society need to be equally catered for.

As Bhola (op cit) notes, adult learners are already in life and at work and can put into action what they learn as soon as they learn it. Hence, they become "urgently and immediately, a part of the generation core of nation - building processes."

Bhola also calls for a re-definition of definition. According to him, development need to be understood beyofid economic and technological terms and must include the political, the cultural and the spiritual.

People must develop themselves. People must learn how the world works, and take initiatives to acquire development - oriented knowledge, attitudes and skills (Bhola).

Turning to the situation in Africa, Bhola urged African countries to "adopt a new paradigm for development." The parameters of production and re-production would have to be re-arranged.
In the view of Graff (1979) functionally literate adults …. according to research reports, are more empathetic, more innovative in agriculture, and more cosmopolitan than illiterates. Such literate adults are also known to have larger farms, greater exposure to media and political information (p.6).

Literacy and education is the engine of development. Literacy exposes people to new ideas, given them broader perspectives of events and situations and makes them ready and willing to accept innovations and economic welfare of their families and communities.

The UNICEF/FGN document (2001); also reveal the correlations between poverty and the educational levels of households heads, which it states, provide “compelling evidence of the mutually reinforcing relationship between low income and low levels of education.” (p.21).

**The Role of Communications**

In the last part of this discourse, we would attempt to quickly review what communication is doing and can do in promoting community and national development. Communication in this context will cover both the traditional and the modern, mass media.

**Traditional Media**

Traditional means of communication like the town-crier, age grade, groups, and folk theatre are important in creating awareness and mobilization for literacy and development. These channels can be used to sensitize and prepare the people, psychologically to be willing to accept changes and innovations. Those involved in the use of traditional means of communication are people known to the community and hence people are likely to be more receptive and listen, watch and ruminate over message through such media.

**Media of Mass Communication**

Given the large number of radio and television stations in Nigeria, it is a matter of concern that such potentially powerful instruments are being le-ft un-utilized, especially in promoting literacy.

According to the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), which is the regulatory agency in charge of broadcast activities in the country, by 2004, it has registered about 22 private television stations in addition to 30 private radio stations. Altogether, according to the commission, there are at present over 250 operational radio and television stations in the country. Most of these stations are owned either by the Federal Government - i.e. the NTA; Nigeria Television Authority and the FRCN - Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria or the different state governments.

A cursory look at the programme schedule of most of these stations shows that they have no special programme either for literacy or education in general. Neither the station owners nor the relevant ministries seem to realize the potential of radio and television in promoting education. Up until the late 1990s, some television stations in the northern part of the country used to air literacy classes on television. But that seemed to have stopped since.

The NTA, Nigeria Television Authority and the" FRCN, Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria boast of having the largest network and reach on the African continent.

The two federal broadcast organizations all have stations across the country. This is in addition to radio and television stations owned by all the states of the country in addition to that of the Federal Capital Territory.

The BBC tradition which Nigerian broadcast media attempts to emulate provides and appreciates the critical role of the media in education, hence, the provision for the broadcast media to dedicate a given percentage of the broadcast day to educational broadcasting.

There is no evidence of any serious effort to use the broadcast to facilitate literacy and other forms of education, and ultimately development. However, even the national regulatory agency, the NBC, National Broadcasting Commission, has no special commitment to using the media to support education (NBC Code, 2006).

It again became the lot of foreign donors to show how the media, radio especially can be used, at least in enhancing quality of education at the primary school level. These organizations notably COMPASS - Community Participation in the Social Sector and LEAP-Literacy Enhancement Assistance Programme have been using radio to facilitate primary education in selected schools within selected states of the country.

The use of IRI - Interactive Radio Instruction is one of the means of using radio to improve primary education. The project came into Nigeria about 3 years ago.

On why the focus is on Radio, Potashnik and Anzalone argue that radio "continues to offer these school - aged students and adult learners the only real possibility of enrichment from the world outside" (1999, VII).

In the same vein, Mayo (1999) identified six strategic ways of using radio in education. These are to:

1) Disseminate information and advice necessary for people's survival and well-being (such as weather and crop conditions, and agricultural, health, nutritional and family innovations).
2) Persuade people to adopt, alter or discontinue specific behaviours (such as social marketing campaigns) promoting the use of condoms as well as other means to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases - infor-tainment, edutainment.
3) Raise public - consciousness and stimulate popular action in support of national, regional and local development initiatives (such as social mobilization campaigns for literacy and family - planning and rural health).

**Concluding Observations:**

Attempt has been made to review the relationship between literacy and development, and the support of communication in this relationship.

Evidence suggests that in the long run, pursuit of primary education at the expense of adult literacy is counter - productive. Studies have also shown the relationship between education of parents and their disposition towards children education.

Jones, in a review of basic education for adults and young people came out with two conclusions:

The first conclusion points to the fundamental role of formal schooling - especially towards universal, learning opportunities. The second point is that no society has come close to achieving universal literacy through primary education alone.

Likewise, the Jomtien Conference on Education for ALL also cautions that countries cannot afford to concentrate just on primary schooling or just on non-formal education, including literacy for youths or adults, if they are to make substantial advances in provision for ALL. "Rather, they (providers) will need to use the "first channel of primary schools (or their equivalent) for children of school age, but this will need to be complemented by the "second channel," which offers literacy and other essential knowledge and skills to youths and adults (King, p. 77).

The World Conference on Education for ALL also acknowledge that certain basic knowledge and skills...can be provided before literacy is achieved. Thus, where resources are sufficient, basic knowledge can be disseminated simultaneously with the teaching of literacy and other basic skills...

This of course implies the use of the media of mass communication. According to King, life-long learning is an integrative concept, which implies that learning and education are possible at any age, from cradle to the grave.

According to him, one way of reaching the goal of education is to educate the parents, since, what children get from their homes is important in how they manage learning in school (239).

Beyond this, as the World Bank publication on the 'Asian Miracle' also acknowledges, "an educated person may increase not only the house-holds income but also the income of other households since her ideas and innovations (may) spill over to others (p. 197).

From the discussion here, it is obvious that Nigeria does not yet seem to appreciate the connection between literacy and development. The provision of literacy education to a farmer or a driver goes a long way in improving his/her performance and this improvement translate to better income and thus, better quality of life.

The implication of the neglect of literacy education and its impact on the country's development is best captured by the UNICEF Document cited earlier - Children and Women Rights - A Wake-Up Call.

Concerning Nigeria's poor performance in literacy provision and its implications, the Document observes that:

Clearly a far greater effort than in the past will be needed, both at the level of the basic education system for children and with respect to adult education, which not only deprives more than half of Nigerians of a fundamental right but is also one of the most serious constraints on national development (2001).

Provision of literacy education, using all available means, is one of the surest ways of preparing Nigerians to live and survive in the 21st century.
While some part of the world is in the midst of digital revolution, with abundance of information for personal and economic enhancement, the minimum that can be done for the teeming millions of illiterates in our society is to empower them with literacy and other economic incentives.
This way, they would have been given the minimal to enable them cope and survive in the twenty first century.

The media of mass communication can be used effectively, with proper planning and organization, in achieving these objectives.
With the large number of radio and television stations across the country, it is imperative to exploit these abundant potentials to fast track provision of education for the illiterates and thus make them better prepared to face the challenges of development in this fast changing digital age.

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