

MASS LITERACY AND THE ATTAINMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN AFRICAN. THE NIGERIA SENARIO

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is generally accepted by most modern states as the best form of government. Its effective practice makes some requirements on the citizens of the states that adopt it as a political system. These requirement or expectations include the level of tolerance of the citizens as well as the extent to which they are able or willing to give up their comfort and reasoning in order to allow for harmony and sustainable development. Conceptually democracy is the voice of revolt raised by human spirit against the application of coercion and imposition in government. It is a political system that is opposed to any form of arbitrary use of authority and tyranny in the management of the affairs of the state or society. Because of its effectiveness as a political system many states have adopted it today. Such countries include the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Austria, and France. A good number of African countries have also adopted it since the attainment of political independence from their Colonial masters. These countries include Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Cameroon and the Central African Republic. The enthronement of sustainable democratic system in most African countries has remained a mirage. This situation is explained by the high level of Social and political crises that are witnessed in some of these countries. It has been observed that a vital factor in the realization of sustainable democracy which has continued to elude African countries is the provision of effective mass 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 cultural and political systems. Majority of Nigerians are of the view that the various attempts at the installation of political democracy since political independence have failed as a result of our inability to provide viable mass literacy programme that will eradicate illiteracy and poverty which have become major factors against political stability in Nigeria. This is the focus of this presentation. The paper highlights the role education plays in the installation of available democratic system. It ex-rays the current efforts of mass literacy in Nigeria and suggests how it could be improved to facilitate the enthronement of a sustainable democratic culture.

INTRODUCTION

Education is an important factor in the accumulation of human capital which is essential for economic and social development. It is also a factor in the development of responsible citizenship which is vital for the realization of sustainable political development. For the majority of emergent African countries the provision of Mass literacy is essential for the eradication of illiteracy and the reduction of poverty. Both poverty reduction and the eradication of illiteracy are critical in the attainment of sustainable political development. The Nigerian nation is currently plagued by numerous and every escalating crises in virtually all spheres of the life. Like in most other African countries the majority of Nigerians are today contending with very high level of criminality, political thugry, religious sectarianism, communal conflicts, and terrorism among others. Aboyi 2004.

The major cause of these problems could be traced to the failure of the Nigerian state to put in place a mass literacy programme that would prepare the citizens for sustainable social, economic and political development, Majority of African countries are also caught in this quagmire.

For Nigeria all efforts at putting in place a sustainable democratic system since the attainment of self rule in 1960 have failed. As already observed this is largely the result of the failure to put in place a dynamic mass literacy programme for the citizenry. When the electorate and the political leaders are educated, they become great assets to the installation of a democratic culture. On the other hand an uneducated electorate constitutes a drag on the democratic process for a number of reasons. As Omachi (2009) observed uneducated electorates are most times

apathetic to political issues and hardly contribute to the growth of the democratic culture. They are generally venerable and subject to manipulations.

As contained in article 26 of the universal declaration of Human Rights, (1948), education is a potent force in the realization of individual creativity as well as improved participation in the social, economic cultural and political life of every society. Among other things the article stipulates that education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the united nations for the maintenance of peace.

As already observed, the provision of education is essential for the eradication of illiteracy as well as the reduction of poverty. Illiteracy and poverty are twin issues or situations that have continued to threaten the attainment of sustainable political, social and economic development in most African countries. Rao (2011) noted that education is not only a prerequisite for the full exercise of the individuals rights but also for understanding and respecting the rights of others. This statement clearly explains the very important role education plays in the realization of sustainable democracy. Countries that have adopted mass literacy as an essential factor in the effort towards the realization of sustainable development have been able to achieve stable political systems which have made it possible for sustainable economic and social development to thrive. This is a development that has eluded most African countries today.

It is no wonder then that in spite of all the natural resources that abound in most African countries, their citizens have remained the poorest in the world.

That education is a vital factor in the realization of political democracy is not in doubt. President Borja of Ecuador apathy captured this when he observed during a presentation at the world summit on Education for All at Jontion that “the vote is an expression of opinion, and wise decisions in choosing governments depend on a well educated public.” Most countries that have political, economic and social crises today are among those that have crises in their education systems. For most of these countries, the provision of education is either grossly inadequate, underfunded, or poorly managed by those in charge. A major challenge that confronts most African countries in the provision of mass literacy for the citizens is their failure to understand that the provision of basic education is central to the attainment of sustainable social, political and economic development. As Rao (2011) observed, in times of economic adjustment and austerity, services for the poor have to be protected; that education-empowerment of individuals-through the provision of learning is a human right and social responsibility. It is only when African leaders understand this and make concerted efforts to live up to it that their situations will improve.

Democracy and Education in Africa

Freedom is universally admitted as the very being of man. Human beings have always attached value to freedom and have sacrificed their lives to protect it. As a concept democracy may be accepted as “the voice of revolt raised by human spirit against coercion and imposition” Dhiman (2007). It is a political system that is opposed to obituary authority and tyranny that comes with it. It is opposed to the exploitation of the weaker by the stronger. Politically democracy is simply seen as government of the people by the people for the people (Abraham Lincoln). In a democratic political system the citizens are protected by the constitution. Such a system voluntarily gives sovereignty to the people. In countries where the culture of democracy is well entrenched it is seen more as a way of life than a political system. In such countries citizens act rationally. To a large extent democratic way of living is the result of man’s faith in himself, his being free and self reliant, his respect for truth, his wisdom and courage to make rational decisions, his ability to accept or respect the views of others. Another essential attribute of democratic culture is the ability to resort to discussion rather than the use of force or coercion in the resolution of issues. For a man to be rational is for him to have faith in the reasoning and position of other people for the promotion of the general interest of the society. In summary democracy as a way of life is built around man’s implicit faith in himself, in being free and self reliant, in respect for truth, having courage of one’s convictions and yet being ready to accept the position of those who differ from him.

For the democratic culture to flourish in any society there are some basic conditions that must be in place. Firstly, there must be an economic system that provides for the basic needs of the people so that they can enjoy the basic needs of life. This is because democracy cannot thrive on the empty stomach of the people. Dahiman (2007). The truth here is that a hungry people can easily be convinced by those who control the resources of the society to do

what may not be in their interest or that of the majority. This has been the case in most African countries. 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 installation of a true democratic culture.

The second condition for the smooth installation of the democratic system in any state is the implementation of a functional mass literacy programme. This is because education is the agency through which the people can be made to become conscious of their rights and duties. All the countries of the world that have installed effective education programs have equally been able to evoke effective democratic culture. For Nigeria as a highly pluralistic society the role of education in the enthronement of a sustainable democratic culture is of great importance.

That the advanced countries of the world have perfected the democratic system today is largely because they have been able to provide effective mass literacy programme for their citizens. At this point, it is necessary to observe that education can influence democracy positively only when it is able to inspire the learner with the urge for social justice, to eradicate the barriers of caste, creed and colour, to deepen their cultural understanding and sympathy and instill love for honest work. This is where education in most African countries including Nigeria has failed.

The provision of Universal Basic Education in Nigeria is considered as a fundamental responsibility of government. The government at various level recognize that an educated citizenry is vital in the attainment and sustenance of political stability. This is because education is the only sure means through which a pluralistic country can achieve any meaningful harmony. It is recognized that education is a major factor in the transmission of democratic values including dialogue, national unity patriotism and self-reliance which are vital for the realization of sustainable development in Nigeria. The corporate existence of Nigeria is currently threatened by ethnic conflicts and terrorism which are largely politically motivated. Babangida (2002) in Omachi (2012) noted, that ethnicity in Nigeria has become a huge human investment that is not only nurtured by the structure and ideology of ethnic nationalities but also becoming increasingly a preferred mode of loyalty as opposed to loyalty to the Nigerian state.

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 and most other African countries it is the illiterate and unemployed youths that are employed and equipped to fight perceived political enemies. The high levels of illiteracy among the youths as well as the ever escalating incidence of poverty in the country provide Nigerian politicians ready hands to engage for their undemocratic practices. The African Peer Review Mechanism Country Self Assessment Report (CSAR) 2007) revealed that Nigeria's democratic administration has not met the expectations of the majority of the citizens as poverty has continued to escalate. The report indicated that inflation was on the increase just as the education system was decaying at an embarrassing rate.

The state of infrastructure was deplorable while unemployment was put at an unmanageable level. The report also indicated that corruption had reached all time high.

Mass literacy has remained a crucible for democracy and liberty as well as sustainable national development. However, for it to achieve these objectives, its programmes must be oriented towards the total liberation of the individual from every form of domination and oppression. Such a programme must also be able to socialize the individual so as to be dynamically involved with others to assume responsibility. For any mass literacy programme to be said to be successful it must be one that is able to prepare the individual for transmission to other education levels with ease.

The Nigerian government has persistently pledge its commitment to the provision of what it calls a sound education system. However, these pledges often end on radio and television screens as the country's financial allocation to the education sector in general and mass literacy in particular has continued to decline over the years. In most rural communities, primary school pupils are taught under trees or in shanty structures. In some states of the federation primary schools which form the core of mass literacy programme in Nigeria are closed for the greater part of the year due to strike actions by teachers over nonpayment of salaries. It may not be an over statement here to observe that except for some few states most state governors do not see the closure of primary and junior secondary schools over a long period of time as anything serious. In the majority of the states teachers' salaries are paid only after all other public workers are paid. This is in spite of the fact that teachers who manage the basic education programme are

among the least paid of all public servants in Nigeria. This situation has not positively influenced the role of mass literacy in the development of a democratic culture in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The mid-decade meeting of the international consultative forum on education for all (EFA) held in Amman, Jordan 16th – 19th June 1996) defined education as empowerment. It further noted that education is key to establishing and reinforcing democracy as well as the realization of development which is both sustainable and humane and peace founded upon mutual respect and social justice. At the Jomtien summit in March 1990 all the nations of the world endorsed the cardinal role of basic education in the enhancement of all aspects of the development process including poverty reduction. Since 1990 significant achievements have been recorded in the expansion of provision of basic education across the world. The situation of the enrollment of girls in schools has also improved across the globe. As apathy captured by Rao (2011) this quantitative development has brought to focus the issue of quality and relevance of content to the needs of the people. Mere access to basic education without due consideration for the quality and relevance cannot make significant impact on the attainment of development. The bottom line here is that issues of quality of universal basic education or mass literacy must be aligned to the content of education being relevant to the current needs of the society, proper acquisition of relevant skills and knowledge for the future as well as improving learning achievement. This is what Nigeria and most other African countries have failed to realize.

Nigeria took a bold step at putting in place a mass literacy programme in 1976 with the Universal Primary Education (UPE). This programme was designed to enlist all Nigerian children in the primary school. Under the programme the Federal Government was to provide free books and other materials to all children enlisted. Primary education was meant to be free and compulsory. However the programme ran into hitches and had to be abandoned due to improper planning and under funding among other reasons. Again in 1999 another attempt was made with the launch of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. This programme provides six years of primary school education and three years of Junior Secondary School within the formal school system. Like the failed Universal Primary Education programme it was designed to be free and compulsory for all children of school going age. It also has provision for adult learners as well as people that are physically and mentally challenged. The objectives of Nigeria's Basic Education programme include:

1. The development in the citizens of full awareness of the cardinal importance of education in nation building.
2. The provision of universal literacy for every Nigerian child for self actualization.
3. The drastic reduction of the incidence of drop out from the formal school system through improved relevance, quality and efficiency.
4. To inculcation of ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life –long learning.
5. The encouragement of the development and use of all the faculties of man through the acquisition of appropriate vocational and technical skills.

The realization of the above stated objectives is expected to bequit on to Nigerians the following if the programme is well implemented.

- i. Respect for the worth and dignity of the individual.
- ii. Faith in man's ability to make rational decisions.
- iii. Adherence to moral and spiritual values in inter-personal and human relations.
- iv. Shared responsibility for the common good of the society.
- v. Respect for the dignity of labour
- vi. Promotion of emotional, physical and psychological well being of all children.

A casual assessment of the realization of the stated objectives of the mass literacy programme of Nigeria clearly shows that the project has not met its set targets. This is particularly true for the attainment of sustainable (political) democratic culture in Nigeria. That Nigeria is today battling with terrorism occasioned by political instability, that ethnic interests over ride the common loyalty of the nation, that due to poverty and ignorance the majority of Nigerians are not able to promote the emotional, physical and psychological well being of their children, that corruption has continued to assume alarming proportions by the day, that we still have youths and adults that are easily hired and used for every odd jobs show that we have not met our set objectives as far as our mass literacy

programme is concerned. African countries need to approach the issue of mass literacy with more commitment to control the current high level of criminality and political instability that confront them. To achieve these African leaders need to adopt education programmes that are relevant to their peculiar needs and situations. For Nigeria as a country that is made up of over two hundred ethnic nationalities mass literacy must emphasize the need for tolerance and harmony among the various ethnic and religious groups. The programme must be designed to build bridges of trust and tolerance among the people. It must also be one that bequits Nigerians with relevance skills that allow for self sustenance economically. There is also the need for African leaders and managers of mass literacy programmes to be prudent and transparent in the utilization of resources allocated for the programme. In most African countries the resources provided for the running of mass literacy programmes are often diverted into personal pockets. The high level of corruption that bedevils most African countries must also be controlled so that resources voted for the provision of vital programmes such as the Universal Basic Education may be properly utilized for the benefit of the people.

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