DEVELOPING RURAL ADULT LEARNERS THROUGH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN RIVERS STATE

By

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Abstract
This paper focused on the development of rural adult learners through information and communication technology (ICT) in Rivers State. Highlighting the quicker and easier accessibility to information through ICT, it pointed out the difficulty encountered in the past in the dissemination of information which resulted in the slow pace of development. This scenario however has not changed in rural communities in Rivers State since information dissemination is still at a rudimentary stage. The paper discussed salient concepts surrounding the topic. It explained the importance and roles of ICT in the development of rural communities and stressed the need to adopt ICT in adult literacy programmes. Some of the challenges inhibiting the utilization of ICT in rural communities include policy considerations, high telecommunications cost, and so on. With greater percentage of the population in the rural communities being the adult learners, the paper concluded by recommending the provision of information and communication technology in adult literacy centers and regular training and retraining of adult educators among others.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a set of technological tools and resources used to create, disseminate, store, bring value-addition and manage information (Kwapong, 2007). The influx of mobile phones, internet, computers and so on into science and technology has brought a great change in the dissemination of information. Every day, people receive, store, process, display and send a variety of texts, sounds and images, across countries and around the globe, thereby giving birth to globalization.

Globalization is a comprehensive term used for the emergence of a global society in which economic, political, environmental and cultural events in one part of the world came to have significance for people in other parts of the world. It is the result of advances in communication, transportation and information technologies (Tabb, 2009). The era of globalization came with such innovation as the ICT
ICT has the potential to reach countries which have not been reached by television or radio by empowering them to participate in economic and social progress, and make informed decisions on issues that affect them (Lukeeram, 2006).

In the past, information dissemination was done by the town crier who was slow and did not cover a large audience, which made this medium of disseminating information not adequate as majority of the people were not informed. The situation however has not changed much in most parts of Rivers State.

The digitalization of most technologies via the internet makes for easy and speedy passage of information. However, access to information by adult learners in most rural communities is still very difficult due to illiteracy, lack of ICT facilities in those areas among other factors. This paper therefore clarified some concepts that are relevant to the study. These include information and communication technology, development, adult education, adult learner and rural community. The various roles of ICT in rural development, its place in adult literacy programmes are discussed. It concluded by suggesting that ICT facilities should be accessible to rural adult learners.

**Conceptual Clarification**

**Information and Communication Technology (ICT)**

The term Information and Communication Technology is made up of three words which are defined separately for proper understanding. According to Bello-Imam and Ihebuzor (2008), information refers to facts, ideas and feelings that are being shared, while communication is a process through which message in terms of information, knowledge, idea, thought and values are transmitted from a sender through an appropriate channel to a receiver to elicit the required response or feedback. Technology on the other hand, is a general term for the processes by which human beings fashion tools and machines to increase their control and understanding of the material environment.

Evidently, ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, such as; radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems as well as the various services and applications associated with them such as video conferencing and distance learning (Munyua, 2000). ICT focuses on the internet, wireless networks, cellular phones and other communication media. It refers to technologies that provide access to information through telecommunications. Telecommunications or telecom is the transmission of signals over long distances (www.techterms.com/definition/itc).
The term development is complex in nature because of its diverse interpretations. In its simplest form, it denotes a process of change, growth and improvement. Development has a multifaceted view and this opinion is shared by Onyeozu (2007) who stated that:

Development should therefore be perceived as a multidimensional process which involves the reorganization and reorientation of the entire social, economic and cultural systems. Added to improvements in incomes and outputs, it involves radical changes in institutional, social and administrative structures as well as in popular attitudes and sometimes, even customs and beliefs (p9).

The above definitions see development as an all-rounder that touches every aspect of human life and not just a specific area such as political or economic issues. It involves the totality of man’s activities. Nyerere in Oyebamji and Adekola (2008) also supported that development is for man, by man and of man.

Consequently, development within the context of this study implies the ability to acquire relevant skills and knowledge to enhance ones role in the society as well as availability of relevant infrastructure. It means the local people having control of their own lives, expressing their own demands and finding solutions to their problems. This cannot be done without education which is an important tool in the development of man. It is against this premise that the use of ICTs in the development of adult learners becomes very necessary.

Adult Education

The term adult education would be best approached by defining the word adulthood. According to Tight (1996), adulthood is a state of being which both accords status and rights to individuals and simultaneously confers duties or responsibilities upon them. It recognizes the roles and responsibilities of an individual that has attained a particular age within a given society. Adult education therefore, could be seen as any educational process undertaken by an adult to acquire skills, knowledge, attitude capable of improving himself and his immediate society. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Ezimah (2004:27), defined adult education as:

The entire body of organized educational process, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise whether they prolong or replace initial education schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional
A community is a group of people living together within a defined territory. Oduaran (1994) citing Osuji (1984) stated that the term community is not static. It entails the interaction of several elements whose geographic boundaries are a clear function of time, place and context or the issue under consideration. This is a clear indication that the term is viewed in different lights. Onyeyozu (2007) stated that a community can be classified as rural or urban depending on its position along the rural-urban continuum at any given point in time. This classification is based on some distinct characteristics that are used to differentiate one from the other. According to him, a community can be classified based on differences in interaction and in cohesion. In his analysis, interaction means how people relate with one another and how each reacts to what others do, while cohesion refers to togetherness that is unity amongst members of a community.

Research studies have revealed that rural life can be cohesive, but it is often restrictive and slow to accept change. The integral nature of rural communities limits social perspective of its members (Onyeyozu, 2007). It is also worthy of mention that the rural communities lack some amenities such as the ICT, which is a limiting factor to development. Also, acceptance of new innovations like the ICT may be slow and lack effective usage due to illiteracy, wrong attitude, and lack of computer skills and so on.
Roles of ICT in Rural Development

ICT plays an important role in the community development process in rural areas. Some of these roles are discussed below.

1. **Administrative Roles**: Administration of any organization entails a process of information dissemination, decision making, monitoring and evaluation of programmes or activities. An adult learner who may be a community chief requires information and ideas from other chiefs or village heads in the daily running of his community, through the use of ICT, access to information is made easier and faster for him. ICT makes administration less burdensome and more effective, and it is a good means for informing community members about new policies, programme and news happening in and around the community (Potashnik, 1998).

2. **Cultural and Social Roles**: ICT plays an important role in the cultural and social life of a community. Vast amount of information and services available today through the internet can be used effectively for the benefit of the entire community. Horizons may expand by interacting with people from other cultures and can stimulate group work and social interaction (Cook 1994, World Link, 2001).

3. **Awareness Creation and Human Resource Development**: ICT in community development increases awareness of happenings around the globe and exposes rural communities on the experiences of other communities and solutions adopted in improving their living conditions. The use of ICT in the development of a community also enhances digital literacy, thereby developing capacities for employment (Hajela, 2005).

4. **Empowering Rural Communities**: ICT can empower rural communities and give them a “voice” that permits them to contribute to the development process. Through ICT, the community can acquire the capacity to improve their living conditions and become motivated through training and dialogue with others to a level where they make decisions for their own development (Balit, 1998:30). The approach should be participatory and could lead to improved policy formation and execution.

**ICTs and Adult Literacy Programmes**

ICTs especially the internet are changing literacy practices at an unprecedented rate. Literacy ordinarily is the ability to read, write and compute. It is the key stone or basis for any meaningful development. Literacies are dynamic systems of social and cultural practices that are being transformed by technological change, electronic communication and the globalization of knowledge. Literacy has been identified as one
of the essential ingredients for obtaining personal, community and societal development and growth, (Ezimah, 2004), there is the need for its adoption to achieve growth and development.

Similarly, Imbabekhai (2009) also agreed that technological changes manifest in rapid transformation and development in the society in terms of transportation, communication, power and energy, and industrialization. These desirable changes that positively transform and enrich the quality of life of people in our communities are the hallmark in the development of a community.

ICTs present an easier access to information and the dissemination of information to a large audience through various media such as the internet, electronic mails, and mobile phones and so on. Stressing the importance of ICT, Tiemo (2006) noted that people need information to plan and carry out their decisions. He explained that more than 90 percent of African population could greatly benefit from information on better choice of food, safe water and basic nutrition, child care, family planning, immunization, prevention and control of endemic diseases. ICTs when used during educational process would cover a larger audience and immediate feed back got on issues concerning them, also giving the learners opportunity to contribute to their own development. Recent studies have revealed that both educators and learners with varying levels of skills and understanding had a range of ICT practices, (www.ncver.edu.au). Some educators according to the study still thought in terms of acquiring ICT skills for academic or work purposes only, but they have seen the need in adult literacy, since the learners have shown the need for it in adult education and in particular, in online banking and searching for information on the internet (www.ncver.edu.au).

Similarly, research has also shown that although the use and familiarity with ICT in work and personal life have increased dramatically, very little has changed in teaching literacy. The use of ICT by educators and learners in their personal lives was more diverse than during classroom experience. Classroom use tended to involve an introduction to computer packages rather than the skills required for using ICT in everyday life (www.ncver.edu.au). The study noted the following implications for teaching practice to include:
1. More sophisticated technical expertise and support are needed
2. The need for strong operational skills
3. Access to high quality and reliable equipment is required.
4. Technical support should be provided.
The above implications suggest that ICTs have not been fully utilized in teaching literacy, as a result of the above, these factors and many others are discussed in the next heading.

**Challenges in the Utilization of ICTs**

ICTs are crucially important for sustainable development in developing countries. Thioune (2003) noted that for the past two decades most developed countries have witnessed significant changes that can be traced to ICTs. Whereas lots of challenges still limit its success. These challenges include:

1. **Policy Considerations:** Policies, regulations and guidelines on the ICT utilization is still at a rudimentary stage (Marcelle, 2000). Policies and strategies that facilitate the use of ICTs in community development have not been put in place. This is also as a result of political goodwill where the government still practices a top-down approach in community development.

2. **High Telecommunication Costs:** The cost of basic internet facilities and other ICT infrastructures is a major deterrent in its use in adult education programmes. This leads to lack of connectivity or access to internet services by communities.

3. **Incessant Power Failure:** The problem of power in some areas of the state makes it difficult to access the web, even when the services are available. This hinders the usage of ICT facilities by adult learners in a community.

4. **Lack of Local Content and Language Barrier:** Information available through ICTs is mostly in English, which majority of the people in the rural areas cannot read. There is a marked shortage of relevant materials in local languages that respond to their needs and calls for significant investment and support for local content (Munyua, 2000).

5. **High Rate of Illiteracy:** Illiteracy is a serious malaise in utilizing ICTs in community development. Basic skills that are required to harness the benefits of ICTs are lacking by most of the people and so they cannot participate actively if ICTs are being used. This may be as a result of rigidity and resistance to change by the adult learners.

6. **Inadequate Human Resources:** Most of the facilitators of adult education programmes lack the necessary knowledge and skills of ICT on its use, and thereby cannot teach or impart such needed skills to the people. This however results in non-utilization of these facilities during community development programmes.
7. **Sustainability of Projects**: Most projects established with external funding face major challenges afterwards due to lack of maintenance and technical expertise. Programme/project sustainability if not ensured from the beginning may lack continuity thereby leading to wastage of scarce resources and abandonment (Munyua, 2000).

**Conclusion**

This paper has emphasized the importance of adult learners in development process and the role of ICT. The extent to which a rural community can be developed lies with the accessibility of ICT facilities in the lifelong learning process of the adult learners that make up the larger percentage of the population in the rural areas.

There is no gain saying that the utilization of ICT in the learning process will obviously make education reach out to a greater percentage of the audience not only easier but also faster. Literacy practices are changing at an unprecedented rate; therefore the adult learners in every given society should be acquainted with this new trend.

**Recommendations**

Based on the foregoing, the paper recommends that:

1. The provision of information and communication technology (ICT) is fundamental in any adult literacy center, therefore it should be encouraged.
2. Adult educators and other change agents should be sponsored regularly by government for training and retraining to acquire relevant knowledge and skills in this technological changing society.
3. Government should focus more on the rural communities in terms of funding adult education programmes.
4. There should be effective monitoring of the telecommunications service providers on the cost of these services.
5. The problem of sustainability of community projects should be considered from the onset during the planning stage.
6. Adequate and qualified manpower should be provided for adult education programmes to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of its programme quality
7. Government should consider the rural areas in their policy considerations in terms of introducing the Nigerian languages in the telecommunications sector to address the problem of language in ICT utilization.
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