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## **Adult Basic Education as a Strategy for Eradicating Illiteracy and Empowering Adults for Sustainable Livelihoods**

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### **Abstract**

*The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted by the member countries of the United Nations to fight poverty and enhance the quality of lives of their citizenry. A major strategy for achieving these goals is the universalization of basic education which is extended to children, out-of-schools youths and illiterate adults. This paper is focused on the provision of Adult Basic Education (ABE) for out-of-school youths and adults who constitute 875 million illiterates worldwide. ABE believes in the philosophy that integrating the teaching of vocational and functional knowledge with literacy skills makes learning more meaningful and enhances their capacity to improve and sustain their livelihoods. Based on the beauty of this programme, the paper x-rays the gains made by the Federal Government of Nigeria, particularly in Cross River State. Although, more women than men have benefited, less than 3 percent of the entire*

*adult illiterates have been reached. The achievement of the MDGs in the State is still a far cry. Mobilization of resources, both human, financial and materials and making the curriculum relevant are needed to make ABE work.*

It is now a decade and a year since the United Nations (UN) launched the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals centered on the need to reduce (or eliminate) the myriad of problems facing humanity such as poor income, poor nutrition, poor health, debilitated capacity to work, poor income, poor nutrition, poor health, deliberated capacity to work, poor education, poor use of resources, high morbidity, high morality and gender-based negative biases (Oxenham, 2004). All these conditions constitute the broad notion of poverty. Faced with these challenges, the 198 UN member countries that witnessed the Declaration in September, 2000 signaled their commitment to improve the lot of humanity. The year 2015 was set as the target for meeting the millennium development goals.

The achievement of the MDGs is a clarion call to action by governments to empower their citizenry who lack the means of sustaining their livelihoods. In the developing economies of the world, now referred to as the South, 1.2 billion people are suffering from abject poverty. They live on less than one dollar a day (Pant, 2004). The basic skills and knowledge required to exploit resources for their own betterment are lacking. Since they cannot fend for themselves adequately; invariably they cannot also contribute to the development process. A pertinent question is: how can they be empowered to change their dehumanizing conditions and help transform their society?

It has become common knowledge that the provision of education, formal or non-formal, is the means through which people can be empowered to sustain their livelihoods (Muller, 2000). Indeed, the importance attached to education has given rise to global movement preaching Education for All (EFA). According to this movement, the realization of the millennium development goals will remain a far dream if the poor, the disadvantaged and the unreached are not given access to education (Oxenham, 2004). Education for All, as is embodied in the Dakar Framework of Action is committing 164 countries that attended the conference to achieve these targets:

- i. Expanding and improving early childhood care and education.
- ii. Ensuring that by 2015, all children, especially girls have access to and complete, free and compulsory education.
- iii. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.
- iv. Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women.
- v. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015.
- vi. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills (UNESCO, 2000).

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These targets or goals are not mutually exclusive of each other. They are interlinked. For instance, putting in place appropriate measures to provide functional education for adults to improve on their livelihoods generally, as indicated in goal no 3, will likely impact positively in reducing illiteracy among men and women (goal no iv). The effect will also cascade down to the achievement of goals no (i) and (ii) respectively, etc.

Generally, what the EFA movement is targeting is the universalization of basic education for children, the unschooled youths (aged 15-24) and illiterate adults, especially women who are disadvantaged due to gender bias. Accessing education to children seems to have improved over the years. The major problem however, is with the adult populace. Currently, an estimated 862 million of the World's population are adult illiterates. More than 70 percent of these figures are women. It is these adults that lack the elementary knowledge and skills (in the formal and modernized economy) vital for improving their health and livelihood, helping their children in school, playing active roles in their communities and making informed political and economic choices – in short, for securing a better future for themselves and their families (Benavot, 2008). This is why EFA is calling on governments and non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders access education to them.

Given this gloomy picture, what is government doing or what has it done to reverse the trend? The aim of this paper is to examine the commitment of both the federal and state governments of Nigeria in providing basic education for adults in the context of EFA goals iii and iv. In the next and succeeding sections of this paper, we examine the concept of adult basic education and its contribution to meeting the millenium development goals.

### **Towards a Conceptual Clarification of Adult Basic Education (ABE)**

In many countries, Adult Basic Education (ABE) which is equated with Adult Literacy Education (ALE), is education that is provided for adult members of the society who have had no formal education, or just a little of it. However, ABE is most preferable because it appears broader than ALE. The latter may mean the mere provision of literacy to the exclusion of other life-support skills.

In helping to explain how broad Adult Basic Education is, Wagner (2000) defined ABE in the context of the basic learning needs or competencies, as education and training that is not only restricted to the mastery of the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) but also in terms of other knowledge, problem solving and life skills. In aligning ABE to basic learning competencies, Wagner (p.132) admonishes that there is need to refer to both formal school-based skills and the ability to manage functional tasks and demands.

Skilbeck (2000) saw the term “basic” in relation to adult education as referring to the competencies, knowledge, attitudes, values and motivations that are deemed necessary in order for people to become fully literate and to have developed educational foundations for life-long learning. To him, basic education can be achieved

either through formal or non-formal education. He went further to explain that competencies, skills and substantive learning defines as “basic” when provided for in schools and similar institutions are usually cast in the form of a core curriculum. This would include literacy and numeracy skills, as well as social and scientific knowledge, physical and health education, arts and crafts. According to Skilbeck. (p. 101), ABE may last for six, nine years or combining both primary and secondary school depending on the country. He cited the Nigerian case where government has recently extended basic education from six years of primary school to junior secondary level, covering nine years.

Like Skilbeck, the term “basic” to Lauglo (2002), means that which suffices to serve as a basic, a foundation upon which subsequent learning and use will build upon. Lauglo then, defined ABE as education which is aimed at adults who have had no schooling or very little schooling. He identified the core elements of ABE to include literacy (reading and writing) and practical arithmetic (numeric skills). Other components of the programme would include vocational skills for livelihood improvement. However, ABE is most successful where literacy and numeracy skills are added to programmes that are already established to teach practical livelihood skills, and not the other way round. By definition, ABE would also include functional skills in the area of child-care, health nutrition and HIV/AIDs prevention, etc (Oxenham, Diallo, Katahoire, Petkova – Mwangi and Sall, 2002).

From the forgoing, there is no disagreement on the concept of adult basic education. ABE operates on the premise that the skills of literacy and numeracy are not end in themselves but end to serve some purposes and practices to the need of the user. From empirical evidence, teaching adult literacy skills alone has not been found to be practically useful because of the neo-literates’ relapsing into illiteracy (Oxenham, Diallo, Katahoire, Petkova – Mwangi and Sall, (2002).

Betts (2002) further explained that focusing training only on adult literacy skills have had limited impact as evidence in high dropout rate, low enrolment and completion rates, and accordingly, low rates of return. This is why many experts and practitioners are advocating the teaching of literacy skills with the problems and job-specific activities of the learners. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 1980) for example, enthuses that stepping up farm production by new technology must have training and literacy as part and parcel of the development process, otherwise providing training and literacy as isolated processes in a developing society is of no avail.

Thus, ABE operates on the philosophy that combining vocational knowledge and functional skill with literacy/numeracy afford the adult learners the opportunity to apply their knowledge, skills and capacities in their job or livelihood activities. In that direction, ABE takes into consideration the needs and relevance of the programme to the adult learners. It begins from where the people are and strives to help them meet their training requirements. The curriculum is not based on preparing the next

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generation of adult learners to enter into working life. Rather, it is based on increasing the skills and knowledge of the adult population here and now (Lowe, 1975).

Adult Basic Education is therefore, context-based, and is derived from the sustainable livelihoods approach to development. According to Betts (2002), the sustainable livelihood approach views people as having access to certain assets of poverty-reducing factors, which gain their meaning through the prevailing social, institutional and organizational environment. This environment, in turn, influences the livelihood strategies – the ways of combining and using assets – that are open to people as they pursue their own defined livelihood objectives. The beauty of this approach is that it is people centered, holistic in content, very dynamic and flexible. Moreover, it builds on peoples’ strength (Betts, 2002:63). This is then linked to a framework which provides a conceptual tool for understanding the context in which people live. This thinking in turn, has its implications for ABE policy and practice for the individual as a recipient, the community and the society generally.

### **The Benefits of Adult Basic Education**

Adult basic education is seen as an equity tool that can empower its beneficiaries to improve their personal and economic well-being. It is generally seen as a route through which the millennium development goals can be achieved (Benavot, 2008). The main assignment is to help poor and illiterate people improve their chances of changing their situation (Strassbourg, 2008).

Increasingly, a number of empirical studies have been published to demonstrate the impact of ABE and education generally in changing neo-literates outlook. A review of these studies by Lauglo (2002:67 - 72) and Oxenham (2004:88 - 91), reveal that:

- Parents who have taken ABE courses are more likely to enroll and keep their children in school. It can also give them the skills and confidence to participate in schools where their children attend, take interest in children’s learning and assist them with educational materials.
- Graduates of ABE do change habits that affect their health and survival. Studies in this aspect prove that mothers who attend this programme use the services of maternal clinics more than do the unschooled women.
- On family planning, men who attend do seem to know about issues of family size and planning and were likely to use them than do those who did not.
- As regard HIV/AIDS prevention, participation in ABE had a strong effect on gains in information about preventing infection: the higher the participation, the greater the gain in knowledge.
- Women who participate are likely to be informed of the nutritional value of foods in improving the health of their children, and are likely prepared to improve on their family menu than the unschooled women.
- ABE improves gender equity and redresses the imbalances suffered by women. In many places, women seem to take the advantage of ABE than do men.

- ABE removes barriers to entrepreneurship and can improve livelihoods. Participants who attend are likely to gain knowledge and skills for improving their job prospects/productivity which may impact on their income level and better well-being.
- ABE impart environmental knowledge which is the basis for a more sustainable use of natural resources.
- ABE builds a broad based society. It helps people to fight for their right, to participate in democratic governance, etc.

### **The Current Position of Adult Basic Education Intervention in Nigeria**

What is the literacy and illiteracy rate with regard to the adult population in Nigeria? If the illiteracy rate is high, what is the government doing? What has it done, taking into cognizance the beauty of the ABE programme? In other to achieve the millennium development goals, is the ABE currently in place relevant to the needs of the adult learners? Can it improve and sustain their livelihoods? The discussion below will attempt to answer these questions.

Nigeria's effort at combating adult illiteracy and in meeting the millennium development goals pre-dates the United Nation's Declaration in 2000. Her efforts even started before the first phase of EFA (1990 - 2000) launched in Jomtien, Thailand. But the efforts in tackling illiteracy, poverty and other related issues were however, spasmodic, lacking serious political commitments and the will to succeed. For instance, the 1982 – 1992 ten years mass literacy campaign did not yield any significant fruit. It did not go beyond the first year of the launching because it was bogged down by a myriad of problems (FME, 2000).

It is indeed true to say that the adoption of education for all, both in Jomtien (1990) and in Dakar (2000), brought a significant shift in the position of Nigeria on adult and non-formal education. This is evidenced in the revised National Policy on Education (2004), which places great premium on basic education. The focus is on the education of the marginalized groups, including nomads and migrants, girls and women, street children and the disabled (Fasokun & Pwol, 2008). The basic education segment of this policy begins from early child care through primary to junior secondary education. This is supposed to incorporate adult and non-formal education.

In September, 1999, the Federal Government of Nigeria launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE). The goal of this scheme is to universalize access to basic education and engender a conducive learning environment and eradicate illiteracy in the shortest possible time (Aborishade, 2001). The programme has three components. The first is the formal basic education for children lasting 9 years. The second is nomadic education for children of school age of pastoral nomads and migrant fishermen. The third component is the provision of basic education for out-of school children, youths and illiterate adults. It is the later aspect that concerns us here.

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It is instructive to note that in Nigeria, the Federal Government provides the policy framework, while it is at the state level that implementation actually takes place.

The establishment of the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (vide Decree No. 17 of 1990) was partly Nigeria's reply to the International Initiative on EFA (FME, 2000). That Commission has since been renamed, National Commission for Mass Education. It is responsible for the organization, monitoring and assessment of adult basic education in the country. The Commission's activities are decentralized, with offices in the six geo-political zones of the country, the 36 states and all 774 Local Government Areas (Fasokun & Pwol, 2008). Following the Dakar framework of Action and the renewed vigour with ABE programmes, government has initiated the following activities:-

- Document existing literacy centres and Non-Formal Education efforts nationwide.
- Create a synergy between literacy and other adult empowerment programmes (agricultural extension, family planning, primary health care, etc) for more effectiveness and efficiency.
- Evaluate, improve and expand ongoing literacy programmes (literacy by radio, Reflect, Adult literacy for the disabled, etc) nationwide.
- Use, maintain and rehabilitate existing facilities such as literacy centers and women's centers.
- Launched a massive media campaign to promote literacy, particularly amongst the most marginalized groups.

Since the basic education programme is decentralized, coordination and supervision of literacy classes are the sole responsibility of the local adult education officers, supervisors and ABE instructors. The minimum number of ABE classes in any local government area is ten. Other additional classes are supposed to be managed and funded by the non-governmental organizations. Examinations are conducted on the basic competencies, reading, writing and numeracy. Life skills which are central to all the literacy programmes are also tested (Fasokun & Pwol, 2008).

A clear picture of the efforts of government in combating illiteracy and in enhancing the acquisition of sustainable livelihood skills through ABE intervention is briefly highlighted using Cross River State as an example.

According to the 2006 National Population Census, the literacy rate for Cross River State is 61.7 percent. The male literate rate is 60.7 percent while for the women, it is 39.3 percent. As for the illiteracy rate of 38.3 percent, the figure for men is 32.6 and for women, it is 67.4 (AANE, Calabar, 2011). Clearly, women are disadvantaged hence, ABE intervention should necessarily target more women than men. What has the State and Local Governments done so far in this direction? Table 1 below presents the picture.

**Table 1: Distribution of Abe Centres and Enrolment Trends in CRS, 2010**

S/N	L.G.A.	No. of Centres	Enrolment Trend		Total
			Men	Women	
1	ABI	21	954	1256	2210
2	AKAMKPA	21	128	477	605
3	AKPABUYO	16	105	458	563
4	BAKASSI	12	123	351	474
5	BEKWARRA	43	609	1006	2215
6	BIASE	26	201	320	521
7	BOKI	14	424	325	749
8	CALABAR MUNICIPALITY	12	636	917	1553
9	CALABAR SOUTH	14	376	683	1059
10	ETUNG	17	271	706	977
11	IKOM	29	247	206	453
12	OGOJA	25	767	969	1736
13	OBANLIKU	6	74	76	150
14	OBUBRA	22	275	524	809
15	OBUDU	13	170	336	506
16	ODUKPANI	16	492	503	995
17	YAKURR	21	272	376	648
18	YALA	24	480	974	1054
		<b>343</b>	<b>6,404 (37.1%)</b>	<b>10,864 (62.9%)</b>	<b>17,208 (100%)</b>

**Source:** Figures tabulated from data taken from the Agency for Adult and Non-Formal Education, Calabar, Cross River State (2011).

Date in Table 1 shows that except for Obanliku, all the other Local Governments have established at least 10 ABE centres as required by government. With more than 10 centres in many of the LGAs, it also shows the strong presence of non-governmental organizations in helping to empower the illiterates.

However, we do not know how many illiterates have been made literate over the years as the information is not readily available from the Agency for Adult and Non-formal Education (ANFE), Calabar. But given the population figure of 579, 024 adult illiterates as at 2010 (ANFE, 2011); the enrolment trend of 17,268 adults learners in ABE classes representing just 2.9% is not encouraging. It means that by 2015, Cross River State in particular, may not be able to reduce the total number of adult illiterates by half (that is, 50%) as envisaged by EFA towards meeting the goal of sustainable development. The only good news is that women who are on the disadvantaged are participating in ABE programmes more than do men (compare 62.9 as against 37.1%).

On the relevance of the programme to the adult learners, a textual analysis of the curriculum of the various subjects shows that the ABE programme is functional. The manuals were prepared by the Federal Government of Nigeria and the National Commission for Mass Education in collaboration with UNICEF. The various manuals are based on these taken from family life, nutrition, HIV/AIDS, social studies and citizenship, etc and combined them with literacy/numeracy skills. The basic education programme however, needs to be flexible in order to accommodate vocational skills



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desired by the adult learners. In most of the centres particularly, outside Calabar Metropolis, the vocational aspects which actually emphasize the acquisition of livelihood skills are lacking.

### **Challenges and Conclusion**

In spite of the fact that ABE has a great appeal, its benefits is yet to be felt in Nigeria; especially in Cross River State where less than 3 percent of the hundred of thousands of the illiterate adults are attending the programme. Without benefiting from this scheme, it means that over 95 percent of the remaining illiterates are not likely to improve their capacity to make their lives better. Mobilization efforts in some local government areas are encouraging. In many others, it is lacking. Many potential adults are not enrolled because they have not been sufficiently mobilized. With the recommended ten centers per local government, the location may be a problem for some would-be-participants, owing to distance.

Most unfortunately, the programme is left in the hands of the local government councils to fund, including the remuneration of volunteer instructors. Right now, many local government councils do not have money because a great chunk of their fiscal allocation is appropriated by the State Government.

These challenges notwithstanding, something must be done to help our adult men and women improve on their livelihoods. Poverty alleviation schemes have not solved their problems because of the way politicians have manipulated it. It is only a functional ABE programme that can make people change their world. The achievement of the millennium development goals calls for a change of attitude and behaviour. It demands the adoption of new and improved innovations and discarding old habits that do not favour positive transformation. For instance, a newly educated pregnant woman is most likely to adopt better health, safe-motherhood practices and appropriate nutrition than an illiterate mother.

The following recommendations are proffered to improve the working of the ABE programme:

- The current six years for the completion of the programme (3 years basic classes, and 3 years for post literacy) should be maintained. It would help the adult learners to properly articulate and apply the knowledge, skills and attitude.
- Livelihood (vocational skills) instructors are in short supply. They should be trained and deployed to make all the ABE scheme effective.
- Capacity building workshops for instructors/facilitators is necessary to acquaint them with the physiology, sociology and psychology and sociology of adult teaching and learning.
- Remuneration of instructors is a *sine qua non* for putting bread on the table. It should not be compromised.

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