# RURAL COMMUNITY EDUCATION AS A STRATEGY FOR COPING WITH THE CHALLENGING ECONOMY IN NIGERIA.

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**Abstract-** Education is a potent force and a vital instrument for the development of economy of every nation of the world including Nigeria. Education aims at bringing about attitude changes, gains in knowledge and skills acquisition leading to enhance self image and improved ability to solve problems individually or through social or community action. The paper examines rural community education as a strategy for coping with challenging economy in Nigeria. It specifically highlights the challenges facing the rural community in Nigeria which affects her economy, and of course in all developmental facets. It also prescribes viable rural education package and finally concludes that emphasis should be placed on human-centred education in order to achieve a more permanent economic development in Nigeria.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is no universally accepted definition of rural communities. Rural Community is usually defined by at least one of the following attributes: demographic characteristics (small size and low density), economic structure (dependence on natural resource industries and occupations, most especially agriculture), or socio-cultural features (primary relationships with strong bonds) (Wise 1998).

Different countries have varying definitions of "rural" for statistical and administrative purposes. For instance, United States Census Bureau refers to rural communities as settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents; have population densities as high as 999 per square mile or as low as 1 person per square mile (Spence, 1992).

In Canada, the organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, defines a rural community as a community with a population density less than 150 persons per square kilometre while for census reasons, a rural community refers to population outside settlements with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants and a population density below 400 people per square kilometre (Statistics Canada, 2007). In India, rural areas are known as 'countryside' or 'village.' According to the Planning Commission in India, a community with a maximum population of 15,000 is considered rural in nature. Similarly, a rural community in Nigeria in this research can be seen as a homogeneous community where you can trace everyone in that community to a particular root or ancestor. It refers to a village or countryside without electric light, tap water, industry, tarred road, quality schools/quality education, etc.

The Rural community education means different things to different people. Some people perceive it as formal education for the rural youth and agricultural education and literacy teaching for adults. To others, it is non- formal education for the whole members of the community. The components of such education range from agricultural-extension, health, home-craft/vocational training to literacy education.

But the term rural community education in the context of this discussion assumed wider dimensions. Lowe in Adewale (1990) defines rural community education as all activities – social, economic, educational, political and cultural – which touch on the lives of rural communities, the knowledge of which is essential to purposeful living and progress. This conception of pervasive education arise from the understanding that, all attempts to change attitude and behaviour involves the educative process, since in order to change, people must first acquire fresh knowledge, insights and skill (Lowe, 1975,p.23).

According to Moemeka (1981), the nature or types of education being conceived of here, is quite different from the conventional schooling education designed for the purpose of awarding certificates, diplomas and degree. Important though the award of certificates, diplomas and degree may be, we are concerned here with the creation of an environment in which awareness is at its height, aspirations are rationally raised, and willingness to work because it's rewarding; becomes more of a natural occurrence than of spasmodic events. According to the author, rural community education refers to education for total liberation that promotes development of man by man and for man. It is an education that brings a learner to a situation where he can examine critically actions which he had previously as "given", begins to see that "reality" is not a closed world from which they can be no exit; and perceive his own situations as one that he himself can alter.

This encompassing view of education finds expression in Hickeys definition of community education in Adeyoyin (1990) as:

a process that concerns itself with everything that affects the well being of all citizens role from one of traditional concept of teaching children to one of identifying the needs, problems and wants of the community and then assisting in the development of facilities, programmes, staff and leadership towards

the end of improving the entire community. (Hickey, 2009, p.23)

The word "strategy" comes from the Greek word for "generalship". Like a good general, a strategy gives overall direction for an initiative, which in this case is rural community education for coping challenges of economy in Nigeria. A strategy is simply defined here as a way of describing how you are going to get things done. A good strategy according to Hustedde, Onuoha and Phillips (2014), will take into account existing barriers and resources (people, money, power, materials, etc). It will also according to them stay with the overall vision, mission, and objectives of development. That is, strategies help you determine how you will realize your vision and objectives of rural development.

The real tenet of this paper hinges on the fact that to become a strong virile and self-reliant nation, the majority of the citizens particularly the rural communities must be properly educated in line with the socio-economic, cultural and political realities. The people in our rural communities should have direct access to education which will enhance the realization of individual potentials. Consequently, this type of education aims at bringing about attitude changes, gains in knowledge and skills acquisition leading to enhanced self-image and improved ability to solve problems individually or through social or community action. The strength and emphasis of this concept of education in question shifts from the promotion of the tangible economic aspects to the intangible non-economic aspects of man. Man therefore is the centre piece of the development strategy. This idea was once mooted by Nyerere, (1988), when he declared that development is for man by man and of man. The same is true of education. Its purpose is the liberation of man from the restraints and limitations of ignorance and dependency. Education according to the author has to increase man's physical and mental freedom to increase his control over himself, his own lives and the environment in which he lives.

**Challenges of Rural Communities in Nigeria**

Rural communities in Nigeria are faced with a lot of challenges which affects their lives and the economic development of Nigeria at large. These problems are discussed especially as they relate to rural education components.

**High incidence of illiteracy:** one singularly important feature of rural population in Nigeria that is very critical and which causes setback in Nigeria rural communities is the high incidence of illiteracy among the adult populace. According to Oreh (2006), illiteracy with its attendant problems has direct implications for developing a well informed, articulate, forward-looking, dynamic, goal oriented and politically conscious citizenry. In a situation where there is an awful lot of illiteracy, ignorance, disease, poverty, hunger, starvation just to mention a few, often proliferate. In other words illiteracy is a correlate of an array of social, economic and political woes.

Supporting this, Adeyoyin (1990) reiterates that an illiterate is significantly limited in his productive capacity. He further stated that an illiterate cannot take advantage of stored up information and knowledge through the printed matter. He largely depends on his memory to store useful and relevant information to his vocation. For instance, a subsistence illiterate farmer has no skill of keeping records of his farming activities and collecting useful and recommended agricultural innovations especially those ones which have been proved capable of bringing about significant increase in production. Literacy is an important ingredient of development. It is therefore not surprising that the world all over speaks about literacy.

**Low quantity of education:** In Nigeria today, rural urban disparities are still noticeable significantly in education in spite of the colossal amount of money being invested in education by the governments and resultant phenomenal expansion of educational facilities at all levels in the past. These disparities exist within and among the states both quantitatively and qualitatively. Some states have a greater number of their schools concentrated in the urban areas with scanty number of schools spread over the larger rural areas. According to Ukeje (1996) the quality of education given to the rural youth leaves much to be desired. This therefore, affect the quality of the life of the rural populace. The youth and adult living in the rural community deserves education to make them happy. Nwabusi (2000), supported this by saying that the ultimate end of education is man's happiness. This is in consonance with Aristotles's view; and ultimately speaking, the end of education is the attainment of the "Summum bonum".

Low level of schooling in Nigeria rural communities: Schooling as an institutionalized form of educating, especially children and youth in the rural Nigeria, has over the years failed to meet the educational needs of the rural youth and children. Oyedeji (1980), stated that the number of children of school age who take advantage of school is very few and far between. According to him, less than 30% of children of school age attend school. Those who attend hardly complete the primary education let alone attend post primary education.

**High drop-out rate:** The drop-out rate in Nigerian schools among rural school children and youth is absymally high enough to raise concern among educational planner and administrators. Majority of these non completers of the basic education (i.e Primary education) often add to the already high illiteracy pool. Without any exaggeration, it seem to us that over 75% of the rural populace are illiterate (Oreh, 2006)

The point is clear here that illiteracy and low levels of schooling which obtains among the rural dwellers in

Nigeria is a significant factor militating against the modernizing effect of both governmental and non governmental agencies towards social, economic and political development in Nigeria.

**Migration:** Closely associated with illiteracy as a problem in rural community is that of migration. The unfavourable socio-economic conditions (called the push factor) which predominate the rural communities such as unemployment, cyclical unemployment, food shortage, poor cash flow, over-crowding, poor transportation and communication facilities, lack of health facilities, etc results to poverty and subsequently underdevelopment of rural communities in Nigeria. Because of these exacerbating conditions and many more, villagers migrate to the city which has all its pull-factors such as better environment, regular wage employment, basic infrastructures, i.e good road, electricity, portable water, improved communication channels and social services like education, health and judicial facilities.

Because of this problem of migration, Nigerian rural communities abandoned their blessed natural resources. The rural labour force have the technical know-how and the entrepreneurial acumen surplus for food and fibre production for both domestic and industrial consumption. But surprisingly, the Nigerian rural farming communities operate at a very subsistence level because the youths and able bodied adults migrate to the rural cities seeking for greener pastures. The rural communities hardly have sufficient food supply all the year round let alone produce a large enough surplus for marketing purposes. Olukoya (2008) observed that the problem of food shortage in rural farming communities has invariably accounts for low birth weight, poor lactation performance, retarded physical and psychological development in early childhood. The author further stated that this problem has accentuated high incidence of protein-calorie deficiency diseases in children, high mortality rate for infants and young children, emaciation and loss of strength in working adults during the pick season of agricultural activities.

**Suggestions**

The following suggestions are being proposed as possible strategies to alleviate the problems and sufferings faced by the rural communities in Nigeria:

- There should be vigorous literacy campaigns and rural community education in Nigeria. The deadly poison of illiteracy or lack of adequate and relevant education renders illiterate and semi-illiterate rural populace vulnerable to all sorts of in-human practices; oppression of all kinds, exploitation in all its ramifications wanting disregard for human dignity. The rural illiterate man is foremost regarded as nothing mere than object- a beast of burden, a fewer of trees, choppers of wood, drawers of water, a cheap commodity in human form. The point here is that, the rural illiterate youth and man need to be continuously librated from his most powerful oppressor, illiteracy, so that his total personality may be enhanced.
- Our aim to combat illiteracy should not be primarily to increase economic productivity. This may sound contradictory to what we generally believe literacy is capable of achieving. We often raise the legitimate question: literacy for what? The general response is literacy for total development of man by man for man (Nyerere, 1988, p.7). The argument here is that literacy or education should aim at developing the entire human personality rather than its emphasis on economic gain. What we are saying essentially is that man as the centre piece of all development efforts has to be liberated, conscientized and sensitized before coherent and lasting economic development can ever become realizable. We should therefore avoid the situation where money and other economic gains are in conflict with the survival and true development of human values.

**Recommendations**

In order to realize the true efforts of community development in Nigeria, we venture to propose the following as the content of education relevant to Nigerian rural communities.

- Functional Literacy: For the rural dwellers to be able to take initiatives and develop their own potentials and utilize prudently the natural resource at their disposal, they need functional literacy that will serve their immediate needs and which will equip them to plan for a better future. Functional literacy therefore becomes a sine-qua-none for adult rural dwellers irrespective of their age. Thus Anyanwu (1987) asserts that functional literacy concerns adults whose illiteracy causes the retardation of economic and social development. He goes further to state the functional literacy links literacy teaching with appropriate technical training programmes associated with functional literacy are always designed to meet the needs of specific occupation. The functional literacy project for rural communities in Nigeria should embrace core courses such as cultural and political education, home crafts, including domestic science that is indigenous rather than westernized type. Local foods and simple locally manufactured cooking gadgets and utensils should be utilized for the teaching-leaning transaction. The functional literacy course should in addition cover health education, family planning problems, local history, self-improvements skill-acquisition and simple numeracy are basic and should go hand in hand with learning how to read and write from the very start.
- All the books and reading materials should be supplemented with the new skills of reading and writing, because the knowledge and skills a person learns are those he will immediately need in his daily run of life so that the overall philosophy and attitude he attains will definitely uplift his personality and run

in harmony with the nation's ideology, political stand and general progress.

- Besides these basic courses, there are those that are location or situation specific. In a community for instance, where cereal growing is predominant the people must be taught more about crops such as soyabean, cowpea, rice, millet, sorgum etc. They should be taught about how to grow them for maximum yield per acre at minimum cost utilizing and acting modern agriculture practices. The implication of this for illiterate adult and youth students is that specially designed and relevant reading materials should be prepared on the predominant crops or occupation of the community, and they must be made readily available to the rural populace.
- The role of change agents. We cannot achieve the above goals unless there is a concerted effort of change agents involved in rural community development. There are many agents involved in the process of rural community development. They include school teachers, adult educators, village agricultural change agents, Community Health Officers, co-operative officers and a host of others involved in social welfare related jobs. The education design for rural communities calls for a well thought out and carefully programmed series of activities by all the experts mentioned above.

Consequently, the functional adult literacy education activities require coherent collaboration of the ministries and private agencies. Each of the relevant ministries should make substantial input into the functional literacy programmes. For example, the ministry of Education will not be too generous if it declares all the primary, post primary schools together with those of other educational centres and institutions as adult education centres. Additionally, the ministry of education can make it a standing policy for all Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Universities to engage in practical teaching of illiterates as part of their responsibilities.

The ministries of Health, Agriculture, Youth and Sports, Social welfare and Community development should send in their experts to make significant input to Adult education programme design. They should also teach their own aspects of the adult education package right from the outset when the illiterates are learning to read and write.

## CONCLUSION

It is reiterated here that rural community education is a potent force for community development all over the world. The rural community education programmes all over the world are basically similar in method, though significantly different in context, content and aims. The aims, content and context of rural community education are location specific. They are contingent upon local realities. Hence, they differ from nation to nation depending upon the stage in which the rural community have attained.

We therefore wish to conclude that a human – centred programme such as functional literacy education is a good strategy for tackling the social, economic and political problems facing the rural communities in Nigeria. It is high time we know now that mental dormancy and social withdrawal stop, when a people's personality and dignity are restored. This is best approached through meaningful human – centred education for the generality of the rural peasantry.

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