

ADULT EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL RIGHTS IN THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Pere-ere F.T. Victor¹

ABSTRACT: The value of upholding individuals' rights in society especially in this post-COVID-19 era can never be over-emphasized. The economic, political, cultural, and social rights of citizens set the parameters of what is expected by citizens from the government as we exist and socialise in society. It is also what gives the legal backing to citizens and what protects them from undue interferences and pressure from individuals, corporate, and government organizations. In Nigeria, serious social issues infringe on the social rights of citizens. Problems of insecurity, regular kidnapping, unemployment, and low standard of living exist. Many believe these long-lingering social issues, which are rooted in corruption, can be curbed via adult education. This will in turn bring about improved democratic practice by the government so citizens are safe and protected. This paper discusses the concept of adult education and how it can promote social rights in the practice of Nigerian democracy in the post-COVID-19 era. The paper examines related concepts on democracy and social rights and their value to national development.

Keywords: adult education, social rights, democracy

The issue of rights gained international attention after the First World War as revealed in the League of Nations. Member states agreed to maintain improved human conditions among men, women, and children and justice and fairness in the treatment of indigenous inhabitants of colonies to promote their well-being and development (Flowers, n.d.). Until the United Nations (UN) published its *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948, there were no clearly stipulated global, ubiquitous rights and fundamental freedoms (United Nations, 2015). Although historical leaders established some rights within their geographical locations—such as Cyrus the Great, who established the basis for individual rights in 539 BCE, and John of England, who signed the *Magna Carta* in 1215—rights were not universal (Oluwadayisi, 2014). Establishment of universal rights became important worldwide in promoting respect for freedom of people in all nations. UN member states and territories were given responsibilities to teach and promote the practice of the *Declaration* within their jurisdictions. This responsibility was enshrined in two covenants in 1966: the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (United Nations, 2022).

Nigerians' rights include security, work, a high standard of living, leisure, and full pay during holidays. Even though major amendments in the Nigerian constitution and improvements in upholding the rights of citizens have been made, we fall short when it comes to the issue of securing lives and properties in Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2022). Presently, Nigerians experience a high level of insecurity and killings by the Boko Haram sect, human organ traffickers, and ritualists. Social inequality and low standard of living are issues for the majority of Nigerians who live below the poverty line (World Bank, 2022). All these factors are clear indications Nigeria has social rights issues; this has become a grave concern.

¹ Department of Educational Foundations, Niger Delta University Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, felixvictor3@gmail.com

Social rights empower members of society to act or speak within a social system. During the pandemic, restrictions prevented citizens from moving, buying, and acquiring food, which also impacted their livelihood. Although the lockdown was initiated to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, nothing such as food, water, or funds was provided for citizens. This led to health breakdown in most Nigerians. While some lost their lives, others suffered psychotic breakdowns. Most were jailed for violating restrictions. This was a complete breach of Nigerians' freedom of movement and association. The government failed to empathize with members of society and insisted on a lockdown with an air of arrogance while turning a deaf ear to the plight of citizens. While members of Nigerian society considered the government's response inhumane, citizens were in a state of double jeopardy: a state of fear of contracting the virus on one hand; and no support from authorities put in place to care on the other hand. Therefore, these issues have enhanced focus; they must be tackled in the event such scenarios (restrictions) occur in the future so members of society can live free and enjoy protection, free movement within the country, and freedom to speak and express themselves.

While some societies across the globe respected the rights of their members in the outbreak of the pandemic and the lockdowns, others did not. Those in leadership positions within those governments failed to uphold citizens' rights. Specifically, leadership failed in their role for striving toward the goal of peace, security of life and property, employment, good health, and more. According to Olumide (2022), the Nigerian government did not effectively fulfil its duties to citizens in the provision of healthcare, relief, and mobility to cushion the effect of the pandemic. This ineffectiveness displayed inability to tackle national emergencies. Emphasising the value of adult education has become imperative, especially as a vehicle to help tackle unpredictable events and offer solutions to curb the challenges of the post-COVID-19 era.

Social Rights: The Nigerian Situation in the Outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to Amnesty International (2010), the term "Nigerian police" is synonymous with violating the rights of citizens. Abuse of power and over-stepping their duties and responsibilities are common among Nigerian law enforcement. They daily mount illegal check points, extort monies from transporters and road users, harass citizens unlawfully, and more. Unlawful torture of innocent individuals, reported to be unanimously perpetuated by the State Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force, was a more recent activity. These are just a few examples of law enforcement's oppressive behaviors; reports state they engage in other corrupt practices.

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, many Nigerians' social rights were violated (Olumide, 2022). Most Nigerians were left to their fate, with many not knowing their rights. Although the government had a good plan to secure the bulk of the Nigerian population, provisions made to cushion the effect of the pandemic did not get to the grassroots. Most Nigerians lost their means of livelihood and starved during the lockdown, which spanned months. Robbery, jail breaks, and more crimes were the order of the day. Vaccines and funding provided were only secured by the upper class, which left most middle- to lower-class Nigerians stranded during the lockdown. According to Okolo and Godbless (2021) effects of the pandemic infringed on rights of society's

members and stalled economic growth. SocialAction, a non-governmental advocacy agency, also reported that even law enforcement agencies' actions were far from protecting the rights of citizens during the COVID-19 outbreak (Admin, 2022a).

The Federal Republic of Nigeria's *Constitution* (1999) clearly spells out 14 fundamental rights of Nigerians including the

- right to life.
- dignity of a human person.
- personal liberty.
- fair hearing.
- private and family life.
- freedom of thought.
- conscience and religion.
- freedom of expression and the press.
- freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- freedom of movement.
- freedom from discrimination.
- freedom to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria.
- freedom to compulsory acquisition of property.
- freedom from restriction and derogation from fundamental rights, special jurisdiction of high content and legal aid.

The *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, a resolution adopted in 1966 by the UN General Assembly, includes right to security, employment, improved standard of living, food, water, housing, and a healthy environment (Ogunde, 2019; OHCHR, 2022).

Several amendments to the *Constitution* since 1999 were made to improve our laws and rights. However, the reality of adhering to the *Constitution* in practice falls below expectations, as major implementation issues remain in Nigeria's present-day democracy. Ogunde (2019) opines the Nigerian government has not satisfactorily protected the rights of Nigerians to meet the required international standard of respecting, protecting, and fulfilling human rights. On the contrary, what we experience presently are a high level of insecurity, unemployment, low standard of living, and similar challenges. Constant insurgency exists in the south and northeast, and kidnappings of school children and innocent citizens of Nigeria across the nation are on the rise.

Scholars argue social rights are not contained in the Nigerian *Constitution*; therefore, government cannot be held accountable. For instance, Oluwadayisi (2014) opines these social rights were grafted into the Nigerian *Constitution* as stated in sections 16-18, 20, and 24; Ogunde (2020) believes they are not. These scholars suggest these rights be engrafted into the *Constitution* so government can be held accountable when there is a breach. Irrespective of these disparities among scholars, Shehu (2013) suggests the issue on social rights has gone beyond its inclusion or non-inclusion in the *Constitution*. Rather, he emphasises enforcement of social rights regardless of these debates.

Furthermore, Oluwaseun (2021) proposes the Nigerian condition has become extreme when it comes to issues of employment, adding that 55% of youths are jobless, with a high poverty and birth rate in rural areas. According to Okolo and Godbless (2021) this is caused by lack of strong institutions.

Studies show the Nigerian state is drifting far from upholding provisions of the *Constitution*. John (2011) stated there is a clear breach by leaders who are supposed to uphold the law. This is evident in their disregard for constitutional provisions. Several accounts record failure by government to provide security; governors and leaders have asked members of their states to defend themselves in the event of an attack from their assailants (Akinsanmi, 2022). Yakubu (2021) blames the current state of our insecurity on the federal system Nigerians operate, which he believes has resulted in the present poverty state and debt. Many fear all this may lead to anarchy and bring Nigeria finally from a near 'failed state' condition to a failed one.

Expectations of Nigerian Democracy in Maintaining Social Rights in Post COVID-19 Era

Since 1999, Nigeria has practiced a system of government known as democracy. According to Burns et al. (1984) and Edosa (2014), democracy is government by the people, for the people, and of the people. Democracy is a type of government that allows members of society to be elected to leadership positions as representatives of their state, local government areas, and country. Democracy also allows members of society to decide freely who becomes their leader (Oxford University Press, 2022). When leaders are elected to power in a democratic system, they are expected to uphold and protect the rights of citizens and improve the operation and practice of relevant institutions in society. Furthermore, they are expected to promote freedom, justice, equity, and fairness. According to Olanrewaju (2021), Nigeria has a leadership problem as leaders are self-centred, unwilling to develop themselves, promoters of nepotism, and non-visionary.

The three arms of government are legislative, executive, and judiciary; all have corresponding institutions set up by the government to create, execute, interpret, and enforce the law. Rotberg (2021) and Campbell and Rothberg (2021) opine government has failed to keep citizens safe and secure in Nigeria, which is evident in the high level of corruption, inconsistent leadership, and inability to tackle insurgency. This means government does not effectively carry out its functions and uphold rights of citizens in our democracy. When key institutions set up to carry out the functions of varying arms of government fail, the government has also failed. It is the responsibility of every government to strengthen institutions under its various arms and other institutions in society. When these institutions are strong, they function effectively and unanimously to achieve goals of the government, which are to foster peace, security, equity, fairness, and justice among citizens.

Key players in the practice of any democracy are adult citizens in society. According to Victor and Asuka (2021) adults sit at the helm of affairs and drive down development. The issue of rights deals directly with adults who are stakeholders in society and who can be found in families as parents, workers like counsellors, teachers, producers, or heads of

industries and parastatals. Each stakeholder has a role to play in upholding social rights of members of society and taking responsibility to be knowledgeable about these rights. Olumide (2022) opined these rights were infringed on during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, 20% of full-time workers were relieved from work without any form of remuneration from the government. (Kabir, 2020). COVID-19 grants that should have been awarded to members of society were hijacked by corruption, and palliatives meant for the public were too meagre per household (Macauley, 2022; Admin, 2020b). According to the United Nations (2020), countries who shaped their responses based on human rights responded to human needs in their societies through measures such as providing emergency water supplies in poor neighbourhoods and emergency shelters for the homeless, suspended housing evictions for unpaid rent, preserved jobs and wages by providing grants for citizens, supported businesses, and extended paid sick leave and unemployment benefits to workers. This was not the case in Nigeria. Many believe if Nigeria's key players were well rounded about social rights and valued them, leaders would have been more humane in enforcing lockdowns and given top priority to social rights of citizens.

A leader's calibre is determined by personality, which is made up of upbringing, level of integrity, experience, knowledge, belief, and values (Ruiz, 2020). These underlying factors are important to note because personality is highly determinate of an individual's leadership style. For a laissez-faire leader, everything goes; this style can bring a downturn to realising the goals of government. Should leaders in society have poor knowledge of what is expected of them and a carefree attitude, they are more likely to have poor results. I believe a leader should be well-educated and knowledgeable about social rights, well-experienced with coping skills and methods to tackle challenges, and uphold good values to be better prepared to handle the affairs of society humanely, especially in unpredictable situations such as the COVID-19 outbreak. Such a leader will perform due diligence to members of society. Democratically elected leaders should, therefore, possess the right qualities and should be capable of fulfilling expectations of members of society who elected them to power.

Lingering social issues before, during, and after the pandemic have revealed a gap in the practice of Nigerian democracy with glaring evidence of poor governance, weak leadership structure, and the violations of social rights. According to Victor and Asuka (2021) an educated adult population is required for Nigerians to experience a positive change in the practice of democracy where the social rights of citizens are respected. Since the advent of civilian rule in 1999, Nigerians have yet to reap the full dividends of democracy in a suitable environment where citizens enjoy their rights. It has, therefore, become critical to educate Nigerian adults on the implication of these issues and value of upholding citizens' rights.

Adult Education for the Promotion of Social Rights in the Practice of Nigerian Democracy

According to Adesokan and Olawuni (2018) one purpose of adult education is to promote national development. Adults' learning has become imperative to achieve the result of positive change in their attitude or behaviour. Adult education is not a new ideology in

society. Scholars such as Freire (2000) and Nyerere (1975) have used the art of educating adults to bring about positive changes in the personal experiences of individuals and society at large. According to Nzeneri (2012), adult education is a vehicle of change with many branches, among which is lifelong education that emphasizes the value of learning for life. Adult education is a veritable instrument for training and retraining the adult population who need to keep abreast of changes to adapt to new ideas, knowledge, and skills in an evolving society. Promoting lifelong learning is critical due to rapid developments in technology, the environment, and knowledge in this ever-changing world so society can adapt and function effectively.

Studies have shown a direct link and positive impact between development and maintaining an educated population (Berger & Fisher, 2013; Elizabeth, 2011; United Nations, 2003). Many believe a society with an educated population will experience socio-economic development. Social rights of members of society were violated during the pandemic's outbreak. For instance, Olorok (2021) reported security operatives put in place by government were top violators of citizens' rights during the pandemic. SocialAction (Admin, 2020a, 2020b) lamented the loss of innocent Nigerians' lives at the hands of security operatives and the poor quality of food, quantity, and discrepancies in the distribution of palliatives during the pandemic. Akubo et al. (2020) reported killings of innocent Nigerians by security operatives who were trying to enforce the lockdown. Obiezu (2020) reported a hungry Nigerian mob broke into a warehouse with palliatives that were not distributed during the lockdown. This is a clear indication of social rights violations with no peace and safety for most Nigerians. One may argue these violations may result from the fact a large number of Nigeria's adult population are non- or semi-literate; however, statistics show both the literate and non-literate adult populations in Nigeria suffered harsh economic impacts and adopted negative coping strategies, both of which threatened human capital during the pandemic (Lain & Vishwanath, 2021).

The educational sector, among other sectors, displayed some level of professionalism in adapting to challenges of the outbreak. For instance, educational institutions switched to online and distance learning using social media platforms and learning applications. Education brings about development and improvement. Kingdom and Maekae (2013) opined education inculcates knowledge, skills, character, and value into citizens; thus, education provides necessary manpower for material productivity resulting in socio-economic development. As expressed above, tackling social rights issues via adult education is highly important. I believe educating the adults who are major stakeholders in society about social rights will prevent a reoccurrence of these violations during any outbreak in the future.

Education can help promote the practice of social rights. According to Banerjee (2021), a knowledge gap on the issue of human rights exists. Among several studies on it, none deals with all aspects of violations. Bajaj (2011) and Banerjee (2021) opined teachers can play a major role in human rights education by promoting awareness to curb violations. In the same vein, adult education can promote social rights through formal, nonformal, and informal education. Social protection education can be adopted into adult basic education (ABE) programme at the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels and direct certificated courses for leaders and other stakeholders in society. The public can be

enlightened on social rights and their value. It is important for leaders and stakeholders to uphold citizens' rights and for citizens to know their rights and speak up for themselves when these rights are violated.

According to Fayoyin (2013) advocacy can bring about positive results in social development regardless of its challenges. For instance, The Share a Child Movement Inc. (n.d.) advocates for child rights protection among other actions. The organization establishes organised units in communities and, with help from community advocates, organises training and campaigns to promote awareness among community members. In the same vein, communities in Nigeria can mobilise for advocacy to promote social rights. Adults in communities can be educated about social rights, their values, how to tackle social rights issues, and services available to people in the event of violations. This education can begin with activities such as mobilising community advocates, promoting strategic partnerships between government and communities, and creating awareness on social issues. Members of society need to enjoy security and safety as their rights and learn government can be held accountable in the event of a breach.

Reports during the pandemic indicated most youths lost their jobs and means of livelihood while others were displaced. Many could no longer afford a comfortable living and could not afford Medicare. I believe that, through adult education, those who lost their jobs can acquire coping skills so they can adapt to changes and tackle challenges. Through neoliteracy, the illiterate youth population can acquire skills to become employable. Furthermore, acquiring skills on the economics of generating and saving funds use of the internet and applications—which was almost impossible to do without during the lockdown—can be promoted. These trainings can be driven down to the grassroots and carried out in adult education centres in Nigeria's Local Government Areas.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak revealed a lot about societies, including their level of preparedness in securing the lives and properties of their citizens and how they value the rights of their citizens. The outbreak changed the narrative on how the world works. The challenges birthed by COVID-19 in Nigeria still linger in our social existence, with many left unanswered. Adult education provides several fora where individuals can maximise their advantage and adapt in this ever-changing world. If ever we are to reap the full dividends of democracy—especially in upholding citizens' rights—the adult population of Nigeria requires adult education.

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