

The Relevance of Lifelong Learning: Implications to Community Development Practice in Rivers State

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Abstract. *This study examines relevance of lifelong learning: implications to community development practices in Rivers State. Lifelong Learning is an important aspect of human life that keeps the individual going through the acquisition of different skills and experiences that makes one happy and relevant throughout life. Embracing lifelong learning leads to a more fulfilling life. It involves acquiring new skills, knowledge and perspectives in an ever-changing world. The paper amongst others recommended that life-long learning should be given top priority; institutions for learning lifelong skills should be sited in various communities*

Key words: *Relevance of Lifelong Learning, Community Development Practice*

Introduction

Lifelong learning has emerged as a transformative paradigm in contemporary educational discourse recognizing that learning is not confined in childhood or the classroom but occurs throughout life and in various contexts. In today's knowledge-based and rapidly changing global society, lifelong learning plays a critical role in empowering individuals, fostering innovative ideas and facilitating sustainable community development. This is particularly relevant in the context of developing societies such as Nigeria, and more specifically Rivers State where communities face multifaceted developmental challenges that require adaptive, inclusive and knowledge-driven solutions. Lifelong learning is broadly defined as "all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and employment-related perspective" (European Commission, 2001). It ensures that individuals continue to develop intellectually, socially, and economically at all stages of life. According to the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2015), lifelong learning is fundamental to building inclusive and resilient societies, reducing inequalities, and promoting scientific development.

Lifelong learning refers to the continuous, self-motivated pursuit of knowledge and skills throughout an individual's life, beyond formal educational settings. Its multifaceted nature is

motivated by both personal and professional goals (Candy, 2002). Lifelong learning continues throughout one's existence meaning that much of what we learn and know in life usually occurs after we have left school or training. John Dewey and Albert Einstein great physicians admonished that intellectual growth should commence at birth and cease on at death" Henry Ford in similar view wrote that "anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty years". Meaning that "anyone who keeps learning stays young; Learning from cradle to grave". The truth is that lifelong learning extends beyond the formal educational activities. "Education is never completed until death (Ojoicheta, K. O, 2019).

In Nigeria, the relevance of lifelong learning is becoming increasingly acknowledged, especially in the context of the National Policy on Education, which emphasizes adult and non-formal education, vocational training and open and distance learning (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014). However, despite the policy framework, practical implementation has been limited due to challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, funding gaps, low public awareness, and lack of political will (Onuka & Amoo, 2015). Rivers State, one of Nigeria's oil-rich in the Niger Delta is one of the oil and gas hubs but socioeconomically complex region, is characterized by both urbanization and rural marginalization. It is only areas such as Port Harcourt metropolis that have seen infrastructural development, while rural communities often lag behind in education, skill acquisition, and social services. This disparity underscores the importance of lifelong learning as a strategic tool for bridging gaps in community empowerment, civic engagement economic participation, and local governance.

Dimensions of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is categorized into three broad dimensions.

- i. **Formal Learning:** Structural and curriculum-based learning typically delivered by educational institutions.
- ii. **Non-Formal Learning:** Organized learning outside the formal system, such as workshops or community education program by apprenticeship.
- iii. **Informal Learning:** Learning gained from daily activities, interactions, experiences, and self-reflection (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004).

Importance of Lifelong Learning

1. **Human Capital Development:** It increases individuals' employability, adaptability, and productivity (OECD, 2007).
2. **Social Inclusion:** Promotes equity and inclusion by enabling marginalized groups to access education and skills training (UNESCO, 2016).
3. **Civic Participation:** Encourages informed citizenship, democratic values, and community engagement (Aspin & Chapman, 2001).
4. **Sustainable Development:** Contributes to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable education (UNESCO, 2016).

Community Development Practice

Community Development Practice refers to the systematic steps and strategies involved in organizing, empowering and mobilizing community members to improve their social, economic, cultural, and environmental well-being. According to the United Nations (1971) in Ajoku and Oji (2020) community development is "a process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities. It is participatory, people-centered, and geared toward building sustainable, self-reliant, and resilient communities (Bhattacharyya, 2004). In Nigeria, community development is especially crucial due to infrastructural deficits, poverty, and unemployment, particularly in rural and marginalized urban areas that needs more effort in terms of attitudinal change and skill development.

Key Features of Community Development Practices

1. Needs Assessment: Identifying community problems, resources, and priorities through participatory

methods like surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder meetings (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006).

2. **Community Mobilization:** Engaging and motivating residents to participate actively in Community Development initiatives.
3. **Capacity Building:** Enhancing the skills, leadership, and institutional capabilities of community members.
4. **Resource Identification and Planning:** Mapping available resources and designing feasible plans for sustainable use.
5. **Implementation:** Carrying out development projects such as water supply, sanitation, education and health.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Measuring progress and adjusting interventions to improve effectiveness (Chambers, 1997).

Types of Community Development Approaches

- i. **Top-Down Approach:** Initiated and implemented by external bodies (e.g., government agencies) with minimal local input.
- ii. **Bottom-Up Approach:** Locally driven with community ownership of decision-making and implementation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).
- iii. **Integrated Approach:** Combines various sectors (health, education, infrastructure) to address complex challenges holistically.

Importance of Community Development Practices

1. **Promotes Self-Reliance:** Encourages communities to take charge of their development (Ife, 2013).
2. **Strengthens Governance and Participation:** Facilitates democratic participation and accountability.
3. **Enhances Social Capital:** Builds trust, networks, and cooperation among community members (Putnam, 2000).
4. **Drives Economic Growth:** Provides employment and income-generating opportunities through local initiatives.
5. **Fosters Sustainable Development:** Encourages environmentally responsible development practices.

Relationship Between Lifelong Learning and Community Development Practices

The interrelationship between lifelong learning and community development practices is critical in understanding how education and knowledge acquisition drive sustainable societal progress. Lifelong learning fosters continuous personal and collective growth, while community development practices provide structured framework for engaging individual in transformative actions that improve community well-being. These two concepts are interwoven, they create a dynamic, participatory, and empowering process that enhances human and social capital, leading to more resilient, equitable, and sustainable communities.

1. **Lifelong Learning as a Catalyst for Community Participation:** Lifelong learning empowers individuals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to engage actively in community development processes. Educated and informed citizens are more likely to participate in decision-making. Mobilization, project planning, and resources management within their communities (Aspin & Chapman, 2011). This civic engagement is a cornerstone of effective community development. "Education that fosters participation can lead to sustainable development by empowering people to make informed decisions and take action at local levels" (UNESCO, 2016: p.11).
2. **Skills Development for Community Empowerment:** Through non-formal and informal learning channels- such as vocational training, workshops, and peer learning- individuals acquire practical skills that enhance community self-reliance. In many rural communities in Rivers State and across Nigeria, lifelong learning programs in agriculture, ICT, tailoring, carpentry, and financial literacy have improved livelihoods, reduced poverty, and strengthened local economic (Onuka & Amoo, 2015; Okojie, 2011). This aligns with the community development procedure of capacity building, which aims to increase the ability of communities to solve their problems and achieve their development goals (Ite, 2013).
3. **Enhancing Social Capital and Cohesion:** Lifelong learning nurtures critical thinking, mutual respect, and social responsibility, which foster inclusive dialogue and cooperation among community members. Such

social capital is essential for community development efforts like health campaigns, environmental protection, and conflict resolution. Putnam 2000) highlights the role of social learning and networks in building trust and cohesion-elements necessary for collective community action.

4. Responding to Local Development Needs: Effective community development procedures rely on understanding local contexts and mobilizing resources accordingly. Lifelong learning supports this by promoting problem-solving, innovation, and local knowledge systems. When community members engage in lifelong learning, they can identify their own needs, set priorities, and develop solutions suited to their cultural, economic, and environmental realities (Bhattacharyya, 2004). This participatory development approach is crucial in places like Rivers State, where community-specific challenges such as environmental degradation, unemployment, and low literacy require localized solutions.
5. Promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): The synergy between lifelong learning and community development procedures directly contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals-epically.

Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

Goal 16: Promotes inclusive societies for sustainable development.

UNESCO (2016) notes that learning throughout life fosters environmental awareness, health consciousness, and peace-building, all of which are integral to community development efforts.

Relevance of Lifelong Learning Impacts to Community Development Practices in State Human Capital Development

Lifelong learning equips individuals with up-to-date skills and knowledge, thereby enhancing human capital, a critical factor in community development. Continuous learning improves employability and productivity, which are essential for economic growth and poverty reduction (Schuller & Desjardins, 2007). In Rivers State, where youth unemployment and underemployment are prevalent, lifelong learning can offer opportunities for skills acquisition, entrepreneurship, and innovation (Okoro & Agbo, 2019). These programs can strengthen the community development procedures by creating a skilled population capable of implementing and sustaining developmental projects. Investing in human capital through lifelong learning enhances economic growth and social cohesion in developing regions. (Aspin & Chapman, 2001).

1. Employment and Social Inclusion

Lifelong learning fosters social inclusion by providing marginalized groups - Including women, the elderly and rural dwellers - with access to education and development opportunities. Empowering these groups "through adult literacy and vocational training' programs enables broader participation in economic and civic life (UNESCO, 2016). In the context of Rivers State, where disparities in education and access to opportunities exist, lifelong learning can promote equity and social cohesion (Eze, 2020). This aligns with community development procedures that emphasize grassroots participation and inclusivity (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006).

2. Promotion of Civic Engagement and Good Governance

Educated citizens are more likely to engage in community decision-making, demand accountability, and participate in democratic governance. Lifelong learning enhances civic competence and encourages responsible citizenship (Belanger, 2011). In Rivers State, where political instability and governance challenges affect development, lifelong learning initiatives can cultivate informed and active citizens (Chikoko & Mphahlele, 2012).

3. Reduction of Youth Restiveness and Cultism

Rivers State has faced challenges related to youth restiveness, cultism, and violence, often linked to idleness and lack of meaningful engagement. Lifelong learning programs focused on vocational skills, entrepreneurship, and civic education can redirect youth energies towards reproductive endeavors (Adebayo, 2013). These programs can also instill values such as responsibility, discipline, and respect for diversity, fostering peaceful coexistence.

4. Community Resilience and Environment Awareness

With environmental degradation being a significant issue in Rivers State due to oil exploration and

urbanization, lifelong learning can increase environmental awareness and promote sustainable practices. Community-based education initiatives on waste management, pollution control, and conservation help build resilience and prepare communities to adapt to environmental changes (Sterling, 2001).

5. Improved Health and Well-being

Lifelong learning enhances health literacy, enabling individuals to make informed decisions about their health and well-being. Health education initiatives can help combat preventable diseases, improve maternal and child health, and promote mental health (WHO, 2015). In Rivers State, where healthcare challenges persist, community-based health education can significantly impact public health outcomes.

6. Fostering Innovation and Technological Advancement

As technology evolves rapidly, lifelong learning ensures that individuals and through intergenerational learning. It encourages innovation and the adoption of new technologies, particularly in agriculture, business and education (Livingstone, 2000). In Rivers State, this is crucial for enhancing competitiveness and diversifying the economy beyond oil.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The study establishes that lifelong learning plays a vital and transformative role in advancing effective community development procedures in Rivers State. Lifelong learning goes beyond traditional classroom education; it fosters continuous acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and competence essential for personal and collective development across all stages of life. In the context of Rivers State where socioeconomic challenges such as unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation, and educational disparities persist especially in rural and riverine communities, lifelong learning serves as a powerful tool for community empowerment, capacity building, and inclusive participation. The implication of lifelong learning is evident in how it enhances human capital development promotes gender equality, strengthens civic engagement, and equips community with the ability to initiate, implement, and sustain locally relevant developmental projects. In view of the forgoing, it is recommended as follows:

1. Human capital development should be given optimum priority to promote lifelong learning.
2. There should be technological advancement and innovation to encourage life-long learning.
3. For life-long learning to be relevant, there should be proper health care system and improved health facilities.
4. To achieve optimum life-long learning, there should be reduction of youth restiveness and cultism.
5. Community resilience environmental awareness should be preached to promote life-long learning.

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