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Literacy for Conscientization: A Framework for Voter Education in Enhancing Sustainable Democratic Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Nigerian political system lacks a virile democratic culture as characterized by general political apathy and voter apathy especially among the illiterate adult population. There is lack of effective participation in the political process by the Nigerian citizens as a reflection of the poverty of political literacy. The grassroots people in Nigeria are yet to be adequately conscientized to be conscious of their rights in terms of critical awareness of the social, economic and political conditions which impoverish them. Conscientization leads to people organizing themselves to participate in democratic governance so as to change their social, economic and political realities. Thus, the significant impact of political literacy facilitated by voter education to empower the citizens for effective participation in the political process cannot be overemphasized. This paper examines literacy for conscientization as a framework for voter education in enhancing sustainable democratic governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Literacy, conscientization, voter education, sustainable democratic governance.

Introduction

Political participation is one of the major indicators of democratic performance. Citizens' involvement in the political process is essential for democracy to be viable and meaningful (Dalton, 1998). There is a growing concern for sources and character of political abstention. Political apathy with voter apathy as a sub-set has thus emerged as a major challenge in mature and emerging democracies. It is worrisome to observe that the Nigerian political system lacks a virile democratic culture as characterized by general political apathy and voter apathy among the illiterate adult population in particular.

There is lack of effective participation in the political process by the Nigerian citizens as a reflection of the poverty of political literacy. The grassroots people in Nigeria are yet to be adequately conscientized to be conscious of their rights to make informed choices at elections without imposition, and their constitutional rights to recall elected representatives for non-performance. Conscientization leads to people organizing themselves to participate in democratic governance. The opinion of Murtala (2015) is that governance is considered to be good if it is participatory, transparent and accountable, as well as being effective and equitable in promoting the rule of law. Good governance ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poor and vulnerable are heard in decision – making, especially over the allocation of development resources.

The active participation of people in governance is premised on their literacy level. Where people lack literacy, they become inactive participants in democratic processes. The

connection between literacy and political engagement is predicated on the assumption that as individuals become more exposed to information about their environment, especially on public institutions and government, they become more prepared to make such bodies more responsive to their needs (Murtala, 2015).

Political and electoral illiteracy is a feature of the Nigerian democracy which has threatened electoral processes and encouraged political apathy, low voters' turnout and high number of rejected votes during elections. These negative tendencies are not unconnected with the problem of low or inadequate voter education in the electoral process. What is being proposed here therefore is that literacy efforts should be geared towards the citizens' conscientization as a framework for voter education in the electoral process so as to enhance sustainable democratic governance in Nigeria.

The Concept of Literacy

In modern sense, literacy is not just to master the skills of reading and writing and numeric computation, but the ability to use those skills for effective communication in the general aspects of one's life in the realm of social, economic, cultural and political. Akinpelu (2008) perceives literacy as lifelong learning in which its skills are acquired permanently and functionally. Literacy skills therefore, must be transferable to all those activities or situations in which literacy is required for effective functioning in a person's community.

What can be inferred from the foregoing is that literacy is a matter of functionality in any situation or condition an individual finds him/herself. Literacy is a set of skills that are learned and acquired by each person at a particular age. Nothing is inherited about literacy as a legacy. It does not exist as a latent ability, it needs to be demonstrated, since facial outlook is not enough as an evidence to justify that one is literate or not.

Bown (2009) views literacy as a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, develop his / her knowledge base and potential, and participate fully in the wider society. Literacy is the foundation of the entire gamut of adult education and it is one of the most important component units of the field of adult and non-formal education. Depending on the learners' contexts, there are different types of literacy, whether in the home environment, local community, market or trade environment, workplace, religious institution, local, regional or national polity.

Literacy and Democracy

Democracy can be described as a system of government which has grown up and developed from the classical regime of direct participation of every citizen in policy decision – making to the modern type of representative model. The features of modern or representative democracy include periodic elections, constitutional government that is based on legislative, executive and judicial institutions, separation of each of these institutional powers of government, free press and the rule of law, among others.

Yakubu (2012) asserts that democratic politics or government is built on certain minimum principles. These principles include participation and inclusiveness, responsiveness and accountability, transparency and good governance, regular, free and fair elections, freedom and respect for human rights and the observance of rule of law. Democracy is a system of government through which the people choose their leaders and hold their leaders accountable

for their policies and their conduct in office. The ideal of democracy or democratic government according to Tukur and Awosanya (2004) is that democracy as a form of government has been viewed as a government that does not only ensure that leaders are chosen by the people, but also that people enjoy a very great deal of right over such leaders, by making them meet up with people's yawnings and aspirations, and making them accountable for their actions and inactions while in office.

Literacy is connected to democracy or democratic governance through an intelligent and adequately informed or enlightened citizenry. In this modern day democracy, there is a great deal of need for an intelligent, enlightened and well informed citizenry. Without an enlightened citizenry, which had been an essential requirement for democracy right from the classical era, democracy could be easily subverted. Sarumi (2011) in one of his studies confirmed that political literacy aspect of adult education such as democracy and good governance would help to reduce political manipulation and domination, political violence, electoral malpractice using the strategy of education and methods of adult and non-formal education in particular.

The political education component of adult education creates the necessary awareness to make informed decisions, choices, understand political parties and their motives through their manifestos, allows beneficiaries to play healthy politics, thereby make people to be led easily and more difficult to be mislead.

The successful operation of a democratic system of government requires a citizenry that is literate, well informed and enlightened, embraces the ethics, dialogue and not just its rhetoric, respects the rights and views of others, accepts and respects the freedom of others to disagree. Literacy promotes not only awareness of belonging to a nation – state but, in particular, of the technicalities of democracy such as dispelling the feeling of helplessness and powerlessness, inferiority complex, apathy and political alienation, each of which is antithetical to a virile democratic system of governance. Literacy imparts the ability to raise critical questions for representative and curb their possible power abuse. It enables the citizenry to have the skill and ability to read between the lines so that they are able to make their own decisions and judgments based on ascertained facts.

Literacy for Conscientization

Paulo Freire's brand of literacy can be understood within the scope of his philosophical principles. The core of the Freirean philosophy is that of conscientization, the creative raising of consciousness and self – awareness of the reality of one's existence, with a view to creatively transforming it through positive and critical action. In specific and concrete terms, conscientization is the creation of critical consciousness of people to the reality of their situation, to the culture of silence in which they are sunk. It is seeking to critically analyse the oppressive situation with a view to attaining understanding of the factors responsible for the dehumanization.

Freirean philosophy has a strong political and psycho – social overtone. The source of the oppression of the masses is basically socio-economic and political, being the fundamental factor in all other types of societal arrangement. Political empowerment and education for liberation are the basis upon which Paulo Freire's conscientization is based. According to

him, when people become conscientized, their eyes and minds become opened to the knowledge of their situation, because of their sharpened intelligence.

Education for liberation is what Freire called 'Conscientization' and this is what he actually regarded as "cultural action for freedom". Education for liberation as one of the themes of Paulo Freire's Conscientization is a radical process, which requires the integration of education with political participation. Freire talked extensively about pedagogy of the oppressed in his conscientization. The pedagogy of the oppressed, according to him, is a humanist and libertarian pedagogy that has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation. The central idea of Freire's literacy for conscientization is the need to deal with or confront the problem of oppression.

Freire (1972) categorically stated that: *In its first stage, the pedagogy must deal with the problem of the consciousness of the oppressed and the oppressor, the problem of men who oppress and men who suffer oppression*" (Freire, 1972: p.31).

The major requirement to deal with the problem of oppression, according to Freire, is education, that is education of the right sort which he called "education for liberation". His own brand of education for liberation is different from the formal education, which he regarded as the banking concept of education, that kills the critical consciousness in the receiver. The capacity of banking education, is a tool employed by the oppressors to minimize or annul the students' creative power in order to serve the interests of the oppressors, who never care to transform the situation of the oppressed.

Freire further described the political situation which surrounds the banking concept of education:

In their political activity, the dominant elites utilize the banking concept to encourage passivity in the oppressed, corresponding with the latter's 'submerged' state of consciousness and take advantage of that passivity to 'fill' that consciousness with slogans which create even more fear of freedom (Freire, 1972:p.67).

In the area of political participation, the Freirean literacy for conscientization has a strong political base and undertone, due to association of literacy with politics. One relevance of Freirean conscientization is the awakening of citizens' political consciousness. It is relevant in a society characterized by low level of education, low level of political consciousness and awareness that have made people to be vulnerable to manipulations of the political class. In view of this, people's interest in public affairs requires a great deal of re-awakening to fully participate in democratic processes.

Linkage between Voter Education and Conscientization Process

Voter education and Freirean conscientization are related because both have political undertone. The freirean conscientization can serve as a spring board for voter education as a catalyst to raise political consciousness and awareness in the electoral and political processes. The strong connecting rod between voter education and Freirean conscientization is political

literacy as a set of abilities considered necessary for citizens to participate in political and governmental affairs of a country. It includes an understanding of how government works and of the important issues facing society, as well as the critical thinking skills to evaluate different points of view (Wikipedia.org/w). But what is voter education?

Conceptualizing Voter Education

Voter education is the sensitization of the electorate on the importance of participating effectively in the electoral processes. Voter education provides information on the right to vote, how to vote, where to vote, how to resist being prevented from voting or other electoral activities, how to seek redress if there is an infringement of people's rights and information about electoral laws including offences and penalties (Akinwale, Igbuzor, Nwankpa, 2011).

Voter education is essential to ensuring that voters are well – informed and can effectively exercise their voting rights and express their political will on election day. The term voter education is generally used to describe the dissemination of information, materials and programmes designed to inform voters about the specifics and mechanics of the voting process for a particular election.

Voter education in the opinion of Okungbowa and Stanley(2012) is a very focused and deliberate undertaking. It is targeted at eligible voters and addressed specific electoral event as well as the general electoral process. Such enlightenment campaign programmes as who can vote from outside the country? Are citizens residing outside the country allowed to participate in the election? How do electors cast their votes? Is it manually marking of ballots? And what are the legal qualifications to become a candidate at legislative elections? Are some of the questions answered by voter education.

Voter education is a public education aimed specifically at meeting the technical needs of all stakeholders in the electoral process. It encompasses a detailed presentation of the basic voter information that every voter must have to enable him arrive, prepare at the polling station and vote. It presents the electoral procedures and arrangement for the operation of these procedures. Voter education focuses primarily on the electoral rights and responsibilities of prospective voters and are able to exercise them, that is, empowers people on their rights and responsibilities within the electoral process. Voter education involves such issues as registration information, eligibility, voting procedure information, voter validity information, election and registration information on why people should vote (The Electoral Institute, 2012). Voter education is concerned with basic human rights and voting rights, the role, responsibilities and rights of voters and the relationship between elections and democracy (INEC, 2014).

Apart from mass participation in politics and high voters' turnouts, the impact of voter education can also be felt on reduction in the number of invalid or rejected votes. In the process of voting, errors of wrong choice or wrong thumb – printing of ballot papers usually occur especially in societies where the vast majority of the population are not literate. This wrong thumb – printing of ballot papers constitutes invalid votes. Through voter education programme, prospective voters receive democratic literacy on how to vote correctly by identifying party symbols and candidates of their choice. Cases of rejected or invalid votes are reduced when voters are properly guided on what to do with the ballot papers in the voting process on Election Day (Jega, 2014).

Voter education plays an important role on people's knowledge of voter registration and election procedures. Apart from the fact that the citizens are mobilized to participate in both registration and election as important electoral activities, prospective voters are made to understand what it entails for them to be involved in these two democratic processes. It is the role of voter educators to create public awareness on qualifications to register as a voter, where registrations is taking place, the day, time and period when the registration of voters lasts, the manner in which registration is conducted and how one's registration is to be corrected if it is wrong (Administration and Cost of Election, Electoral Knowledge Network, 2013). Voter education equally sensitizes the prospective voters on how to safe – keep Temporary Voter's Card (TVC) and Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) so as not to trade in them or give strange / untrusted fellow to keep.

The knowledge of what constitutes electoral offences and penalties to be awarded are part of voter information transmitted by voter education. Voter education is to ensure that people's confidence and trust is built in the Electoral Management Body (EMB) like INEC in Nigeria. The role of voter educators to build confidence and trust in the Electoral body by the people is to underscore the need for election officials to be impartial in the process of discharging their duties. The messages of voter education should be directed towards giving assurance to the electorates that their votes will count an election so as to retain their trust and confidence in the Electoral Management Body. Awareness is generated through voter education on attitudes and behavior towards peaceful elections rather than violence and intimidation. One area where voter education plays an important role in Nigeria is how to curb the spate of electoral violence which has become a persistent phenomenon in the political process. Voter education messages are designed to promote peaceful elections so that the citizens can shun violence, political thuggery and intimidation. The contents of voter education include among others: Elections and democracy, the duties and responsibilities of Election Management Body, the legal framework governing elections, voter registration and election procedures, election calendar, the role of political parties and the link between voting and government.

Paulo Freire's Conscientization has an indirect linkage with voter education, and this has made the former to be relevant as a framework for the latter as a key component of the electoral process. The need to cure political and voter apathy through effective voter education makes the Freirean method relevant to any political system. The Freirean literacy method is important as a way of eradicating illiteracy as well as being a political weapon. Its political weapon provides the conditions through which the people can be empowered to liberate themselves from the disempowerment which has been imposed on them through illiteracy. The relevance of Paulo Freire's Conscientization to voter education is in the area of voters' empowerment through democratic literacy. Democratic literacy as one element of Paulo Freire's Conscientization can serve as a framework for voter education through the system of awakening the consciousness of the citizens for effective participation in the electoral process. Freire's ideas in terms of critical literacy, allows the vast non-literate population to have a say in the ways public affairs are being conducted. The citizens, through a well – designed voter education curriculum, should develop critical mind to ask questions and they should be assertive on issues that affect their rights.

Political empowerment through voter education should be able to liberate the minds of the citizens, charged them to demand for accountability from the rulers and should be able to equip them with freedom to participate in governance without imposition. This is desirable because education for liberation is one of the themes of Paulo Freire's Conscientization, and

voter education process in any political system, when based on Freire's ideas should be used as an instrument of people's direct participation in the political process.

Voter Education and Sustainable Democratic Governance in Nigeria

The pertinent question at this juncture is how can we use voter education or voter literacy to promote stable or an enduring democratic governance in Nigeria? For the purpose of recapitulation, voter education typically addresses voters' motivation and preparedness to participate fully in elections. It pertains to relatively more complex types of information about voting and the electoral process, and is concerned with concepts such as the link between basic human rights and voting rights, the role, responsibilities and rights of voters; the relationship between elections and democracy (Adedokun, 2017). Voter education has a potent power in all these areas to increase the intellectual capacities of voters to have a better understanding of the electoral process and thereby enhancing effective participation that will nurture the growth of democratic practice.

Voter literacy promotes good governance. This is because the citizens develop critical mind through enhanced intellectual capacities to understand the workings of government as an institution of governance that encourages good services as public goods rather than politics as private goods. Corroborating this assertion, Egunyomi (2010) was of the opinion that critical literacy on the part of the citizens (literate adult population) is essential for the effective operation of governance at both the local and state government levels.

Since Nigeria attained political independence in 1960, the country had been struggling to entrench democratic values in all spheres of her political life. The initial lack of a defined political culture and consensus has resulted in numerous political problems that have pitted one ethnic group against another. As such, the need for the entrenchment of democratic values for nation building in modern day Nigeria has become crucial in order to foster peace and unity in the country. The emphasis here is that peace and unity cannot be realized in Nigeria without proper political literacy for all ethnic groups that make – up the nation, Nigeria (Egunyomi, 2010).

Voter education promotes sound knowledge of democracy through which citizens make informed choices during elections rather than being subjected to imposition. The opinion of Sarumi (2011) confirmed that adult education programme such as democracy and good governance, and political education would help to reduce political manipulation and malpractices using the strategy of education and method of adult and non-formal education in particular. Where sound knowledge of democracy is promoted in this manner, there is tendency for democratic sustenance. Democracy, according to Akinpelu (2008) goes beyond mere political institutional structures to the very attitude, value system and culture behind them. It takes a democratic personality and a democratic citizenry to run a successful democracy; otherwise the anti-democracy practitioners would quickly subvert it. Akinpelu further reiterated that the successful operation of a democratic system of governance requires a citizenry that is literate, well informed and enlightened, embraces the ethnics, dialogue and not just its rhetoric, respects the rights and views of others, accepts and respects the freedom of others to disagree. All these qualities are embedded in good voter literacy to promote the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussions in this paper have shown that the citizen's effective participation in the political process is connected with their level of literacy, and that general apathy and voter apathy in particular could be brought under control where the citizens have been adequately conscientized. Where people lack literacy, they become inactive participants in democratic processes and it has been proposed that literacy efforts should be geared towards the citizens' conscientization as a framework for voter education in the electoral process in order to enhance sustainable democratic governance in Nigeria.

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