

SUPPORTING NON-FORMAL EDUCATION LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN NIGERIA: MATTERS ARISING

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Abstract

Non-formal education (NFE) is crucial for national development in Nigeria, providing essential learning pathways for out-of-school populations and marginalized groups. Despite its recognition in national policies and its diverse benefits in enhancing literacy, vocational skills, and social inclusion, NFE in Nigeria faces significant challenges. This paper examines the "matters arising" that hinder the effectiveness of NFE learning environments. Key issues include inadequate funding, poor infrastructure and accessibility, a shortage of qualified instructors, irrelevant curricula, low learner motivation leading to high dropout rates, ineffective monitoring and evaluation, and negative public perception. Addressing these challenges is vital to unlocking NFE's full potential. The paper proposes solutions such as increasing government funding, developing innovative funding mechanisms, improving infrastructure, implementing comprehensive instructor training programs, designing demand-driven curricula, fostering learner-centric environments, establishing robust monitoring systems, and launching public awareness campaigns to rebrand NFE. These interventions are essential for achieving educational equity and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of individual empowerment, societal development, and national progress. In Nigeria, while significant attention has historically been directed towards formal education systems, a substantial portion of the population remains unreached or underserved by traditional schooling. This includes out-of-school children, early school leavers, illiterate adults, marginalized groups, and those in remote or conflict-affected areas (FRN, 2004). It is within this critical context that non-formal education (NFE) emerges as an indispensable alternative and complementary pathway to learning and skill acquisition.

Non-formal education, as defined by Coombs and Ahmed (2000), encompasses "any organized systematic educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal school system to provide selected type of learning to particular sub-group in the population, adults as well as children." This broad definition includes a diverse array of learning experiences such as functional literacy programs, vocational training, life skills education, community development initiatives, apprenticeship schemes, and continuing education programs (Amirize, 2001). Unlike the rigid structure of formal education, NFE is characterized by its flexibility, relevance to the needs of disadvantaged groups, focus on clearly defined purposes, and adaptability in organization and methods. It aims to provide practical, relevant knowledge and skills that empower individuals to improve their livelihoods, participate actively in society, and contribute to national development (Ukwuaba, 2015).

In Nigeria, the recognition of NFE's importance is embedded within national policies, notably the National Policy on Education (NPE), which emphasizes the eradication of mass illiteracy and the provision of educational opportunities for all, including out-of-school populations (FRN, 2014). Initiatives such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program and the establishment of the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) underscore the government's commitment to expanding access to education beyond conventional schooling (FRN, 2004.). Furthermore, successful programs like the Girls Education Project Phase III (GEP3) have demonstrated the viability and impact of NFE in addressing educational disparities, particularly for girls and those in Integrated Qur'anic schools (Alkali, 2019).

Despite these policy pronouncements and commendable efforts, the implementation and effectiveness of NFE learning environments in Nigeria face numerous persistent challenges. These include inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, a dearth of qualified facilitators, lack of mobilization and awareness among target groups, poor record-keeping, and issues of monitoring and evaluation (Yusuf et al., 2013; Zakari & Yusuf, 2014). Moreover, there remains a need for greater emphasis on development-oriented NFE that truly fosters self-reliance at both individual and national levels (Akubuilu et al., 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Non-formal education (NFE) in Nigeria, despite its critical role in national development and its recognition in national policies, faces significant and persistent challenges that severely hinder its effectiveness and ability to reach out-of-school populations and marginalized groups. These challenges include inadequate funding, leading to poor infrastructure and a lack of essential resources; a shortage of qualified and motivated instructors due to poor remuneration and limited professional development; irrelevant curricula that do not align with learners' needs or current job market demands; low learner motivation and high dropout rates stemming from socioeconomic pressures and a lack of immediate, tangible benefits from programs; ineffective monitoring and evaluation systems, which impede accountability and data-driven decision-making; and a pervasive negative public perception and social stigma that views NFE as inferior, thereby limiting participation and societal support. Consequently, the full potential of NFE to foster educational equity, enhance literacy, provide vocational skills, and promote social inclusion in Nigeria remains largely unrealized, perpetuating educational disparities and impeding sustainable development.

This paper, seeks to delve into these critical issues, exploring the multifaceted challenges and opportunities associated with strengthening NFE provisions across the country. By examining current status and gaps, this paper aims to provide an analysis of the "matters arising" that require urgent attention to maximize the transformative potential of NFE in Nigeria. Ultimately, this discussion contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational equity and sustainable development, offering insights and recommendations for more effective and impactful NFE business in the Nigerian context.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine and provide an in-depth analysis of the "matters arising" that impede the effectiveness of non-formal education (NFE) learning environments in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper aims to:

1. Identify and elaborate on the key challenges currently confronting NFE in Nigeria.
2. Highlight the implications of these challenges on the accessibility, quality, and overall impact of NFE programs on individuals and national development.
3. Propose a range of comprehensive and actionable solutions and interventions designed to overcome these identified challenges.

Non-formal Education and Its Dimensions

Non-formal education (NFE) in Nigeria refers to any organized, systematic educational activity outside the established formal school system, designed to serve specific learning needs of particular subgroups (Ihejirika, 2000). It acts as an alternative or complement to formal schooling, often targeting those who missed out on or dropped out of formal education, such as out-of-school children, youth, and adults, including nomadic communities, migrant families, and the disabled (FRN, 2004).

The dimensions of NFE in Nigeria are diverse, focusing on practical and relevant skills. Key dimensions include:

- i. Literacy and Numeracy: Providing foundational reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, particularly for adults and out-of-school youth (NMEC, 2008).
- ii. Vocational and Skills Acquisition: Offering training in various trades and crafts, enhancing employment and income-earning potential (Amirize, 2001). Examples include tailoring, carpentry, and agricultural extension programs.
- iii. Life Skills Education: Equipping learners with critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and adaptability skills essential for personal development and social integration (Ukwuaba, 2015).
- iv. Community Development Education: Including initiatives like rural development training, health education, and mass mobilization campaigns.
- v. Remedial and Continuing Education: Catering to those who did not complete formal education or wish to improve existing knowledge and skills.

NFE plays a crucial role in human capital development, poverty reduction, and achieving social inclusion in Nigeria. The specific benefits of non-formal education are captured in the next sub-heading.

Benefits of Non-formal Education in Nigeria

Non-formal education (NFE) in Nigeria offers significant benefits, particularly for individuals excluded from the formal schooling system. It serves as a vital tool for human capital development, addressing various societal challenges (Yusuf & Tsagem, 2022).

NFE enhances life skills and personal development, equipping individuals with practical knowledge and competencies necessary for daily life and improved productivity (Yusuf, 2022). This includes critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills (Bagudo & Yusuf, 2019).

NFE promotes economic empowerment by providing vocational training and skill acquisition programs. These initiatives enable beneficiaries, including out-of-school youths and adults, to gain marketable skills, start small businesses, and improve their income-earning potential, thereby

reducing poverty and unemployment (Yusuf & Sholagberu, 2024).

Thirdly, it improves literacy rates among adults and youths who never had formal education or dropped out early. This functional literacy is crucial for effective participation in socio-economic and political activities (Yusuf & Sholagberu, 2024.).

NFE fosters social inclusion and community development. It reaches marginalized groups like women, nomads, and people with disabilities, providing them with educational opportunities that promote awareness, self-image, and active engagement in their communities (Abba & Alkali, 2021).

The provision of NFE is operated in a non-formal setting, an environment that is flexible and suitable for all kinds of learners. The question that comes to mind is what is a non-formal education learning environment?

Status of non-formal education learning environment in Nigeria

A non-formal education learning environment is an organized, systematic educational activity outside the traditional formal school system. It's flexible, learner-centered, and often focuses on practical skills and specific needs of a target group, without typically leading to formal certification (Coombs & Ahmed, 2000). Non-formal education (NFE) plays a crucial role in Nigeria, serving as a "second chance" for millions who have missed out on formal schooling due to various socioeconomic, cultural, and even conflict-related barriers (Adewale, 2009). It encompasses a wide range of programs including basic literacy, post-literacy, women's education, nomadic education, continuing education, and integrated Quranic education.

Challenges facing Non-formal Education Learning Environment in Nigeria: Matters Arising

A number of challenges has been identified to have contributed to poor non-formal education learning environment. These matters include the following.

Inadequate funding

Inadequate funding is a significant challenge plaguing non-formal education (NFE) in Nigeria. Despite NFE's crucial role in providing basic education and life skills to out-of-school children, youth, and adults, it consistently receives insufficient financial allocation compared to formal education (Ike, 2021; Adewale, 2012). This scarcity of funds impacts infrastructure and resources as many NFE centers often lack basic facilities, teaching materials, and equipment, hindering effective learning (Amadi & Nwogu, n.d.). Low salaries, delayed payments, and lack of professional development for facilitators lead to low morale and high turnover rates, compromising instructional quality (Ike, 2021). Insufficient funding limits the scope and scale of NFE programs, making it difficult to reach the vast number of Nigerians who need a "second chance" at education (Adewale, 2012). Proper oversight and assessment of NFE programs are hampered, making it difficult to gauge their effectiveness and ensure accountability (Ike, 2021).

Inadequate Infrastructure and Accessibility Barriers

A significant impediment to effective NFE delivery in Nigeria is the widespread lack of adequate infrastructure. Over 70% of NFE centers operate without dedicated, functional learning spaces, often relying on makeshift structures, community halls, religious buildings, or even open spaces. These environments are frequently unconducive to learning, lacking basic facilities.

Shortage of qualified instructors

One significant challenge is the shortage of qualified instructors. Many NFE programmes rely on volunteers or individuals who may lack proper pedagogical training and subject matter expertise. This often leads to a decline in the quality of instruction, making it difficult for learners to acquire meaningful skills or knowledge. (Nigerian NewsDirect, 2025).

Irrelevance of the curriculum

Another critical issue is the irrelevance of the curriculum to the needs of the learners and the current job market. While non-formal education is designed to be flexible and responsive to specific groups, many programs in Nigeria still operate with outdated curricula that do not equip learners with practical, demand-driven skills. (Yusuf, 2011).

Low learner motivation and high dropout rates

Furthermore, low learner motivation and high dropout rates pose a significant hurdle. Participants in NFE programs often juggle learning with work, family responsibilities, and other daily challenges. When programs fail to offer immediate tangible benefits, maintain flexible schedules, or provide a supportive learning environment, learners may lose interest and discontinue their studies. (Zakari & Yusuf, 2014).

Ineffective monitoring and evaluation

The ineffective monitoring and evaluation of NFE programs also contribute to the challenges. There is often a scarcity of reliable data on learner achievement and program effectiveness. Without robust systems to track progress, assess impact, and identify areas for improvement, it becomes challenging to ensure accountability, optimize resource allocation, and refine program delivery. This lack of systematic oversight hinders the ability of administrators and policymakers to make informed decisions and demonstrate the value of NFE initiatives (Zkari & Yusuf, 2014).

Poor public perception and social stigma

Finally, poor public perception and social stigma associated with non-formal education create a barrier to participation and support. In many Nigerian communities, NFE is often viewed as inferior to formal education, a last resort for those who could not access conventional schooling. This low public perception can lead to a lack of recognition from both government and society at large, making it harder to secure adequate funding, attract qualified teachers, and encourage learner enrollment. The stigma can limit the reach and overall success of NFE programs in achieving their full potential (Yusuf et al., 2013).

Suggestions for improving Non-formal Education Learning Environment in Nigeria

As matters arising from the non-formal education learning environment in Nigeria, several challenges hinder its effectiveness and outreach. Addressing these issues systematically is crucial for unlocking the full potential of non-formal education in national development.

A significant hurdle for non-formal education in Nigeria is insufficient financial allocation. Government funding is often meager, and reliance on donor agencies can lead to unsustainability when such support diminishes. To overcome this, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. The government must demonstrate increased commitment by significantly boosting budgetary allocations to non-formal education, recognizing its vital role in human capital development and

poverty reduction. Furthermore, innovative funding mechanisms should be explored, such as establishing dedicated non-formal education trusts, encouraging private sector partnerships through corporate social responsibility initiatives, and exploring user fees where appropriate and affordable, with robust provisions for subsidies for indigent learners. Community contributions, both in cash and in kind, can also play a role, fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.

The scarcity of adequately trained and motivated instructors severely impacts the quality of non-formal education. Many instructors are volunteers with limited pedagogical training or are regular teachers who lack specific skills for adult learning and diverse non-formal settings. A sustainable solution involves a comprehensive instructor development program. This includes developing standardized training curricula specifically for non-formal educators, focusing on adult learning principles, participatory methodologies, and subject-specific content relevant to learners' needs.

Low motivation and high dropout rates are often symptoms of other underlying issues, including irrelevant curricula, poor instructional quality, and socioeconomic pressures. Addressing this requires creating a more learner-centric and supportive environment. Strategies include making learning experiences engaging and directly applicable to learners' lives, offering flexible learning schedules to accommodate work and family commitments, and providing support services such as childcare or transportation where feasible.

The lack of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks makes it difficult to assess the impact and effectiveness of non-formal education programs, leading to resource wastage and an inability to course-correct. A robust M&E system is vital for accountability and improvement. This involves developing clear, measurable indicators of success, both qualitative and quantitative, aligned with program objectives. Regular data collection on learner progress, instructor performance, curriculum relevance, and program outcomes should be institutionalized.

Non-formal education often suffers from a negative perception, being seen as a last resort for those who failed in the formal system, or as inferior in quality. This social stigma can deter potential learners and undermine its value. Collaborations with community leaders, influencers, and local businesses can help champion non-formal education and integrate it more deeply into community development initiatives, thereby enhancing its social standing and recognition.

Conclusion

Non-formal education (NFE) in Nigeria is an indispensable pathway for empowering underserved populations and fostering national development, yet its transformative potential is significantly hindered by persistent challenges. As this paper has explored, matters arising from the current NFE landscape—including inadequate funding, insufficient infrastructure, a dearth of qualified instructors, irrelevant curricula, low learner motivation, ineffective monitoring, and pervasive social stigma—collectively undermine its reach and effectiveness. Addressing these critical issues requires a concerted, multi-pronged approach: increased government investment, innovative funding mechanisms, strategic development of accessible learning environments, comprehensive instructor training and incentives, and the implementation of demand-driven, flexible curricula. Furthermore, fostering learner motivation through supportive environments and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems are crucial for demonstrating impact and ensuring

accountability. Ultimately, overcoming the negative public perception of NFE through targeted awareness campaigns and by showcasing its vital role in lifelong learning and economic empowerment will be key to unlocking its full potential, thereby contributing significantly to educational equity and sustainable development across Nigeria.

Recommendations

To support and enhance non-formal education learning environments in Nigeria, the following recommendations are crucial:

1. The government must significantly increase its budgetary allocation to NFE, recognizing its vital role in national development. Furthermore, innovative funding mechanisms should be explored, including dedicated NFE trusts, private sector partnerships through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and exploring affordable user fees with robust subsidies for indigent learners. Community contributions in cash and kind should also be encouraged to foster ownership.
2. Government and other stakeholders must invest in developing and upgrading dedicated community learning centers, ensuring they are strategically located and equipped with essential resources such as reliable internet access, electricity, and relevant learning materials. Implement innovative solutions like mobile learning units and digital platforms to bridge geographical divides and reach underserved populations. Policy initiatives promoting public-private partnerships should facilitate the construction and maintenance of these facilities.
3. State Agency for Mass Education must develop and implement standardized, comprehensive instructor development programmes specifically for non-formal educators. These programs should focus on adult learning principles, participatory methodologies, and subject-specific content relevant to learners' needs. Provide opportunities for continuous professional development and offer better remuneration, recognition, and clear career progression pathways to attract and retain qualified individuals.
4. State Agency for Mass Education must conduct thorough needs assessments at the community level to identify the specific skills, knowledge, and competencies required by learners. Curricula should be modular, allowing learners to choose relevant subjects, and should incorporate practical, hands-on learning experiences. Regular reviews and revisions of the curriculum, with input from learners, instructors, and local industry, are essential to ensure continued relevance.
5. Managers of learning centres must create engaging learning experiences directly applicable to learners' lives. Offer flexible learning schedules to accommodate work and family commitments, and provide support services such as childcare or transportation where feasible. Celebrate learner achievements, foster a sense of community, and involve learners in decision-making processes to boost motivation. Address socioeconomic barriers through targeted support programs and incentives.
6. Develop clear, measurable, and qualitative and quantitative indicators of success aligned with program objectives. Institutionalize regular data collection on learner progress, instructor performance, curriculum relevance, and program outcomes. This data should be analyzed and used for informed decision-making, program adjustments, and demonstrating impact to stakeholders. Establish independent evaluation mechanisms to enhance credibility.
7. State Agency for Mass Education must launch concerted public awareness campaigns to shift

negative perceptions and social stigma associated with NFE. Highlight success stories of non-formal learners and showcase the tangible benefits of NFE in lifelong learning, skill development, and economic empowerment. Collaborate with community leaders, influencers, and local businesses to champion NFE and integrate it more deeply into community development initiatives.

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