

# Skills acquisition as strategy for sustainable poverty eradication in Nigeria

Okadi, Ashagwu Ojang<sup>1\*</sup>, Agu, Rachael Ifeoma<sup>2</sup> and Onu, Nkechi Emmanuella<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Agricultural Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu state, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Home and Rural Economy, Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Anambra state, Nigeria.

\*Corresponding author: Email: ashagwu.okadi@unn.edu.ng; Tel: +234 7066980933.

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**ABSTRACT:** Poverty and unemployment remains a common feature of the Nigerian economy, with 62.6 per cent of the population living in poverty. Despite the enormous potentials and natural endowments in Nigeria, efforts aimed at eradicating poverty do not always yield expected dividends, thus escalating the rate of terrorist activities, banditry, kidnapping, prostitution, and other anti-social behaviours. Failure in poverty eradication efforts has often been attributed to corruption and the inability of beneficiaries to effectively utilize the resources. This is most often because the beneficiaries lack the capability and the skills required for the effective investment of the resources provided. This paper discussed the role of skills acquisition in promoting poverty eradication in Nigeria. The review covered the concepts of skills and skills acquisition; poverty and poverty eradication in Nigeria; roles of skills acquisition in poverty eradication; problems associated with skills acquisition in Nigeria, and approaches for enhancing skills acquisition in Nigeria. It was concluded that skills acquisition in relevant fields holds great promise in enhancing the productivity of poverty eradication efforts, and promoting sustainability in the efforts to eradicate poverty in Nigeria. Major recommendations made include private individuals, political office holders, NGOs, relevant government agencies and other corporate organizations should consider skills training programmes as integral components of their poverty alleviation efforts, while political office holders who have constituency portfolios and responsibilities should consider the establishment of skills training centres, renovation and equipping vocational and technical education institutions as key projects in their constituencies.

**Keywords:** Poverty, poverty eradication, skills, skills acquisition, unemployment.

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country with a population of about 200 million people, the most populous country in Africa, the sixth-largest in the world, and it occupies a landmass of 923,768 km<sup>2</sup>. According to the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs) (2020) and World Economic Forum (2019), Nigeria has the largest economy in Africa and boasts of a Gross Domestic Products (GDP) of US\$ 397 billion and a 17 per cent share of the continent's GDP, with abundant human and material resources. Despite the enormous potentials, poverty and unemployment remains a common feature of the economy, with 62.6 per cent of the population living in poverty (Human Development Report, 2018). The Multidimensional Poverty Index, in the Human

Development Report (2018), showed that the proportion of those living in extreme poverty in all its dimensions was about 22.5 per cent. OSSAP-SDGs (2020) described Nigeria as home to the largest number of multidimensional poor in the world, with ten states in the north of Nigeria accounting for 70 per cent of the total who are multidimensional poor. World Data Lab's Poverty Clock (2020) quotes the number of people living in extreme poverty as 105, 097,856 representing 51 per cent of the population.

Closely related to poverty is unemployment. The unemployment rate is equally high, as there is a relationship between unemployment and poverty level. Nigeria's unemployment rate was 14.2 per cent in 2016,

20.4 per cent in 2017 and 23.1 per cent in 2018, almost five times higher than the global rate of 5 per cent in 2018 (UN, 2019 as cited in World Data Lab's Poverty Clock, 2020). The youth population accounts for 55.4 per cent of the combined unemployment and under-employment rate, with most engaged in the informal sector, where job and income security are not guaranteed, and thus the possibility of transitioning out of poverty remains low.

With the dominant role of Nigeria in Africa in terms of the large population size and share of the economy, complacency in the battle against poverty will produce devastating effects on the continent; hence various governments and administrations have made the war against poverty one of the critical components of their policies and programmes. The programmes of the government at various tiers aimed at boosting employment and reduce poverty do not always achieve intended objectives due to misplaced priorities and corruption. Most of the programmes do not aim at reducing poverty but alleviating the signs and symptoms of poverty through the provision of material resources to beneficiaries. While there is nothing wrong with this approach, people can only be lifted out of poverty when they acquire the capability for effective decision making and management of the productive resources at their disposal. According to Soto et al. (2020), sustainability of rising living standards, poverty reduction and provision of better opportunities for the growing population, requires consistent investment in human capital formation through education and training. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in Nigeria, where a majority of the citizens do not have access to quality education and training because they cannot afford the cost.

Consequently, a large percentage of her youth population is idle. The World Bank (2019) estimates that the percentage of youths (aged 15–35 years) who are not learned, employed or trained is about 20.5 per cent in 2017 as against 38 per cent in 2018, an increase from 26.8 million to 70.7 million in one year. For those with some form of education and training, the skills acquired are most often not relevant to the labour market needs due to non-responsive curricula, non availability of relevant training resources and equipment among others, thus increasing the percentage of youths not in any form of training, education, or job. The paper reviewed the role of skills acquisition in the fight against poverty and suggests approaches for promoting skills acquisition for sustainable poverty eradication in Nigeria.

## THE CONCEPT OF SKILLS AND SKILLS ACQUISITION

The term skill is most often used to describe qualifications, general skills and as part of one's competence. It is sometimes used as the trades or crafts which people engage in. Notwithstanding the context in which it is used, what is crucial is that skills acquired enhance an

individual's capability to engage in a productive venture. It has the potentials to enhance earnings, promote living standards and reduce the incidence of poverty. According to Green (2011), skill is a personal quality and has three key features: productivity, expandable and social. Skill is productive because it delivers essential services; expandable because skills are enhanced by training and development, while social indicate that skills are socially determined.

Skill is an important recipe for human capital development and an indicator of the value of a person's stream of current and future earnings. According to Mbah and Elobuiké (2016), skill is the ability to make purposeful movements that are necessary to complete or master a particular task. The level of proficiency in which the ability is exhibited can be enhanced through education, training, and experience among others. Skills refer to the productive capabilities acquired through all levels of education and training, cutting across formal, non-formal and on-the-job settings, which enable individuals to become fully and productively engaged in all areas of the economy. When acquired, skills equip people to adapt these capacities to meet the emerging demands and opportunities of the labour market.

Skills acquisition is a process that leads one to the mastery of required skills. It is a tool that has been used by man through the ages to develop abilities to enhance his living standard. According to Isaac (2011), skills acquisition is an essential tool for eradicating extreme poverty and hunger because it creates avenues for employment and wealth creation. It increases the capability of the individual to attain self-sufficiency, seek paid employment, and is therefore pivotal in the battle to eliminate hunger and poverty, by enhancing the employability of young people. Skills acquisition is the development of a new skill, practice or a way of doing things usually gained through training or experience. It results in a positive change in the knowledge, attitude and skills possessed by an individual with multiplier effects on his income earning potentials and social standing in the society.

According to King and Palmer (2006), skills acquisition takes place at various levels including pre-vocational and orientation skills acquired through general primary or lower/upper secondary education; traditional forms of school-based technical and vocational education and training (TVET) at the lower/upper secondary level, centre/institution-based vocational training; formal/informal enterprise-based training (including traditional apprenticeships); and public or private agricultural training. Others include general tertiary education and higher-level technical and private professional skills training, including training of instructors/teachers; postsecondary agricultural education, training and research; high-level health skills; higher-level business skills; high-level governance skills among others.

Skill acquisition is aimed at poverty reduction. It entails considering the multidimensional nature of poverty, paying due attention to all its dimensions, without undue emphasis on specific dimensions such as income. Skills are relevant in all sectors, be it economic, industrial, agricultural, commercial, services and health among others as it enhances decision making, resource utilization, and overall productivity. Education and training generally, have a link with improvements in productivity, quality, diversity, occupational safety, and health and income benefits. Unfortunately, there is a greater focus on individual and biophysical/income-related aspects of poverty, and less attention to the multidimensional nature of poverty when linking skills development to poverty reduction. Premium Times (2020) recognized the place of education and training in poverty eradication when it explained that educating children contributes significantly to the fight against poverty, environmental sustainability, and improved health as well as building peaceful and resilient societies.

The necessity for skills acquisition to eradicate hunger and poverty is given a central focus in the sustainable development goals (SDG 4) (United Nations, 2015), because of the rapid changes in the workplace. These changes are mostly due to the advent of technology, globalization; automation; work place changes such as transition to a knowledge and service economy, less hierarchy and supervision, more autonomy and responsibility for workers, more collaboration, among others. If the objective of eradicating poverty by the year 2030 is to be achieved, Africans in general and young people particularly, would need to acquire abilities and attributes to enhance ways of thinking, learning, working and living in the world. Such attributes include creativity and innovation, critical thinking/problem solving/decision making, learning to learn/metacognition, communication, collaboration (teamwork), information literacy, ICT literacy, citizenship (local and global), life and career skills, and personal and social responsibility.

## POVERTY AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN NIGERIA

The concept of poverty is difficult to define. There is hardly a universally accepted definition due to its multidimensional nature. Various authors approach the definition of the concept based on the prevailing social, political, economic and environmental conditions. According to Fasoranti (2010), poverty is defined according to the angle from which a person views it, his present experience, and condition of his environment, the aim of such definition, his occupation and idea of what constitutes the good life. No matter how it is conceptualized, it remains unarguable that poverty connotes deprivation. The World Bank (2011) described poverty as multifaceted and connotes a variant of meanings including low levels of income, education and

health, vulnerability to the health challenges, income loss, natural disaster, crime, violence, voicelessness and powerlessness of citizens. Bhalla and Lapeyre (2016) and Thornton et al. (2006) expressed the concept of poverty in terms of social exclusion and vulnerability to climate and weather. Barrientos and Hulme (2016) and Shah (2016) conceived poverty in terms of lack of access to social protection and gender inequality. Poverty has a multiplier effect because lack of access to resources has direct effects on the health status, life expectancy, security, education, relationships, food security, and the overall standard of living of the people.

In line with the above, Taiwo and Agwu (2016), O'Connor (1991) cited in Adofu et al. (2013) described poverty as the inability of the citizens to attain a specified minimum income level and therefore, unable to provide the necessities of life needed for an acceptable standard of living. The individual is not able to cater adequately for his/her necessities of life, social and economic obligations, lacks gainful employment, skills, assets and self-esteem; and has limited access to social and economic infrastructure such as education, health, potable water and sanitation, and consequently, has limited chance of advancing his/her welfare to the limit of his/her potentials and capabilities.

In Nigeria, the poverty situation is difficult to comprehend, particularly considering the vast human and material resources in the country. According to Aiyedogbon and Ohwofasa (2012), poverty in Nigeria remains a paradox because despite the rich human and material resources, coupled with increasing national income; a larger percentage of the population still lives in poverty. Its pattern is distinct from those of other countries, especially developing countries in Europe, America and Asia because economic growth does not impact positively on the poverty level (Dauda, 2017).

The persistent nature of poverty has been attributed to several factors including lack of adequate education or skills required to earn a means of livelihood. Taiwo and Agwu (2016) identified some factors including a faulty education system. Faulty education and training system is a key factor responsible for poverty in most third world countries. The curriculum of instruction in education and training institutions is alienated from the skills, knowledge and attitudes required in the workplace where graduates are expected to work upon graduation. The curriculum is not responsive to changes and emerging challenges in the world of work. Most often, there are no linkages or partnerships between education/training institutions and the industrial sector. The consequence is that most graduates possess skills that are not relevant to the world of work. Such skill mismatches result in unemployment as most graduate unemployment are not due to lack of job vacancies but the lack of skills required to take up available opportunities in the labour market.

Considering the importance attached to the fight against poverty and hunger, successive government in Nigeria

have initiated a number of programmes and policies to eradicate it. According to Oshewolo (2010) and Taiwo and Agwu (2016), the policies and programmes which the Nigerian government have initiated over successive years to address the poverty problem include: Farm settlement scheme in the 1960s, National Accelerated Food Production project in 1972, Operation Feed the Nation in 1976, Free and Compulsory Primary Education, Green Revolution, Low Cost Housing, River Basin Development Authorities, National Agricultural Land Development Authority, Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) in 1973, Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme, Strategic Grains, Reserves Program, Rural Electrification Scheme, Rural Banking Programme in 1977, Green Revolution Programme in 1980, Family Economic Advancement Programme, Better Life for Rural Women in 1987, Family Support Programme, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986, National Directorate of Employment, Directorate for Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI), Mass Transit Programme, Guinea Worm Eradicating Programme, Petroleum Trust Fund, National Economic Recovery Fund (NERFUND) in 1989, National Poverty Eradication Programme in 1999, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS)

Other policies and programmes identified by Taiwo and Agwu (2016) include Trade and payment liberalization, Tariff reform and rationalization for the promotion of industrial diversification, deregulation and greater reliance on market forces particularly in the downstream activities of the crude oil industry, adoption of appropriate pricing policies of all commodities and adoption of measures to stimulate production and broaden the supply base of the economy among others. The President Mohammed Buhari government on assumption of office established a number of programmes to promote the living standard of the people and eradicate poverty. Some of these according to Premium Times (2020) include the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP), Vision 20:2020, National Industrial Revolution Plan, Nigeria Integrated Infrastructure Master Plan, Nigeria Agenda 2050, and Medium – Term National Development Plan (MTNDP), YOUWIN, N-POWER, and Graduate Trainee schemes among others. The goal of the MTNDP is to among others facilitate the lifting of one hundred million Nigerians out of poverty in the next ten years. This plan follows the World Bank's projection that Nigeria will become the third most populous country in the world in 2050. According to Premium Times (2020), the strategies outlined for achieving the objective include human capital development, efficient management of resources, greater financial inclusion, and transformation of the agricultural sector to enhance food security. Others include strengthening the existing social safety net initiative by increasing access to enrollees for fit the various programmes in the scheme, providing easier and increased access to financial services for micro and small

scale businesses, massive investment in education, among others.

Despite these efforts by government to eradicate poverty, the problem continues to persist. This is because most of these efforts target the symptoms and not the causes of poverty. According to Thin (2004), poverty alleviation aims at cancelling the symptoms of poverty and/or reducing the severity of poverty without making any effort to transform people from poor to non-poor. In poverty eradication, people need to be lifted out of poverty, with conscious efforts made to reduce the numbers of poor people and/or transform poor people into non-poor people. In Nigeria, most government policies and programmes to address the poverty problem have most often emphasized poverty alleviation without any effort to lift people from poor to non-poor.

## **ROLES OF SKILL ACQUISITION IN POVERTY ERADICATION**

The following are the roles of skill acquisition in poverty eradication:

1. Better management of resources: skills training increase the capability of the people to sustainably manage resources provided by various poverty reduction/eradication policies and programmes of government. This is because the decision-making ability of beneficiaries is enhanced.
2. Reduces unemployment: The level of skills acquisition has a direct relationship with the employability of the people. When skills possessed are relevant to the industry needed skills, a greater percentage of the people will be engaged in both formal and informal sectors, thus enhancing their earnings. Most cases of unemployment and underemployment in Africa are a result of inadequate training which is not enough for the individual to acquire the skills needed for gainful employment.
3. Enhances income earning potential of the people: increased employability due to acquired skills leads to increased income. Enhancement in income increases the purchasing power and the quality of goods and services consumed, with a corresponding increase in the standard of living and a reduction in the poverty level.
4. Skills promote entrepreneurship spirit among the people: According to Akpama et al. (2011), acquisition of vocational skills enables people to develop a sense of entrepreneurship which leads to a significant reduction of poverty among young adults. This is because most people remain poor since they lack the knowledge and skills that can enable them to be self-employed or take jobs where they are available. Obabe (2001) noted that the production of skillful educated and self-reliant individuals who will be useful

to themselves and the society by enhancing the socio-economic growth of the society is the sure way of reducing the incidence of poverty in the country.

5. Skills development promotes social and economic integration and causes a positive relationship to exist between skills acquisition, economic and social development of individuals and nations. As the people increase the level of acquired skills, their income earning potentials increase with a corresponding increase in their social standing.
6. Reduces criminal activities: when people acquire skills, they become more employable and engaged. This reduces idleness and the chances of their participation in anti-social behaviours such as armed robbery, kidnapping, banditry, prostitution, terrorism among others.

### **PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH SKILLS ACQUISITION IN NIGERIA**

The following are the problems associated with skills acquisition in Nigeria:

1. Poor public conception of skills acquisition: According to King (1991) cited in King and Palmer (2006), skill acquisition and skill development have had a very controversial history, both in colonial regimes and in metropolitan countries, because they have been thought to be particularly relevant to subject peoples and to lower classes and to the less academic pupils. In Nigeria, skill acquisition programmes including formal technical and vocational education and training (TVET), are meant for the less privileged, those who cannot afford general education programmes. Those who pursue these programmes are regarded as being inferior or second class citizens.
2. Occupation specific nature of skills acquisition programmes: Skills acquisition and poverty reduction programmes in Nigeria are tied to specific occupations and driven by a desire to demonstrate a direct impact on the incomes of poor families by their children's participation in the programmes. Occupation specific skills reduce the transferability and flexibility of skills, thus its sustainability.
3. Alienation of skills training and education institutions from the industrial sector: There are no linkages or partnerships between education/training institutions and the industrial sector. Consequently, most graduates possess skills that are not relevant to the world of work. Such skill mismatches result in unemployment as most graduate unemployment are not due to lack of job vacancies but the lack of skills required to take up available opportunities in the labour market.
4. Undue emphasis on general education and academic excellence: The education system in Nigeria places less emphasis on skills training and encourages

general education with fewer provisions made for other forms of education and training. The methodology of instruction does not promote hands-on and competence-based approaches to facilitate skills training.

5. Lack of quality skills trainers: There are shortages of trained professionals in most skill areas in the Nigerian school system. Even in the informal sector, most key training is still being handled by expatriates who may be too expensive for most training institutions to afford.
6. Poor funding: The problem of funding is a common denominator for all problems in the education sector in general. Poor funding is responsible for poor training equipment and infrastructure, poor quality personnel, and the production of unemployable graduates.
7. Inadequate training equipment and infrastructure: Equipment and facilities are generally in short supply in most training institutions. Where they are available, they are either non-functional or have become obsolete. The result is that most graduates leave training without a knowledge of the basic machines and equipment used in the workplace where they are purportedly prepared for, thus widening the already widened skills gap.

### **APPROACHES TO ENHANCING SKILLS ACQUISITION FOR POVERTY ERADICATION IN NIGERIA**

The following are the approaches to enhancing skills acquisition for poverty eradication in Nigeria:

1. Make skills acquisition an integral component of all poverty eradication programmes.
2. Provide infrastructure and other necessities for skills utilization: Skills acquired can only result in an enhanced standard of living and reduce poverty incidence when it is utilized. When the capabilities of individuals are improved through different levels and types of education and training, poverty reduction can only result in the presence of a supportive environment and other facilitative infrastructures such as work and employment.
3. Enhancing school – industry linkage: Proper linkage need to be fostered between the training institutions and the industries where graduates of the school system are expected to be engaged upon graduation. This will not only ensure that skills acquired in school are relevant to industry needs but also enhance the employability of graduates, thus reducing the rate of unemployment.
4. Realigning curricular to reflect industry skills needs: Demand-driven learning is possible when industry players and other stakeholders are integrated into the curriculum planning process. This will ensure that the educational content is relevant to the skills, knowledge and attitude required in the workplace, thus reducing the percentage of unemployable graduates.

5. Methodological changes in the delivery system: There is a need for methodological transition from the conventional lecture approaches to those that encourage hands-on and competency-based approaches. This is important because graduates will be assessed based on what they can do with the acquired skills as against what they can memorize and reproduce on paper.
6. Introduce trade subject as compulsory for all levels of the school system: This is to ensure that school graduates acquire skills in one field or the other thereby enhancing the chances of self-employment and self-reliance.
7. Involving the youths in policy formulation: It is very important to involve the youths in the formulation of policies that address the issue of poverty eradication as an understanding of the aspirations and mindset of young people will facilitate the effectiveness of youth policies. According to OSSAP-SDGs (2020), such an approach will foster a greater understanding of what it takes to make the training successful in transitioning into employment opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Poverty incidence in Nigeria remains a paradox when it is compared with the abundant human and material resources. The growth in GDP of the country as often reported by the National Bureau of Statistics does not always translate to any reasonable improvement in the people's standard of living. Poverty reduction efforts do not always yield expected dividends because the majority of the beneficiaries of the material and financial resources provided do not have the skills and competence to productively invest the resources, thus the abysmal performance. Vocational skills acquisition in relevant fields holds great promise in enhancing the productivity of poverty eradication efforts and promoting sustainability in the efforts to eradicate poverty in Nigeria.

## Recommendations

Based on this review, it is recommended that:

1. Private individuals, political office holders, NGOs, relevant government agencies and other corporate organizations should consider skills training programmes as integral components of their poverty alleviation efforts.
2. Political office holders who have constituency portfolios and responsibilities should consider the establishment of skills training centres, renovation and equipping of vocational and technical education institutions as key projects in their constituencies.
3. The National Orientation Agencies and the National Directorate of Employment should collaborate and

devise programmes to enlighten the youths on the importance of skills acquisition.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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