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Global and Societal Issues in Adult Education: Implications for Policy and Practice in Nigeria

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Abstract: Adult education remains central to achieving inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all as envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal 4. However, in contemporary era the field has faced unprecedented global and societal pressures that have reshaped its priorities and delivery mechanisms. This paper explores these pressures with a particular focus on Nigeria within a comparative international frame. Drawing on recent reports and studies, including UNESCO's Global Report on Adult Learning and Education 5 (GRALE 5), OECD Skills Outlooks, and Nigerian research, the paper identifies key global issues such as widening digital divides, migration and demographic shifts, funding constraints, climate change impacts, and post-COVID-19 recovery challenges. It also analyses societal factors that intensify or mitigate these challenges in Nigeria: inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, gender disparities, socio-cultural barriers, and gaps in policy implementation. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, the paper synthesises evidence and highlights promising practices from other regions to inform Nigerian adult education policy and practice. The findings underscore the need for integrated, well-funded, and inclusive adult education systems, greater use of digital technologies, and stronger partnerships across government, civil society, and international agencies to achieve transformative lifelong learning outcomes.

Keyword: Global and Societal Issues, Adult Education, Policy, Practice, Nigeria.

Introduction

Adult education is widely recognised as a cornerstone of sustainable human development, social inclusion and democratic participation. It enables individuals to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies that support active citizenship, employability, personal fulfilment and community resilience. In the last decade, global attention has intensified on lifelong learning as an essential means to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet in recent years the context for adult education has changed dramatically. Rapid technological advances, economic shocks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate change, large-scale migration and shifting demographics have created new pressures on governments and learning providers. These trends have reshaped policy priorities, funding streams and delivery mechanisms worldwide.

Nigeria exemplifies both the potential and the challenges of adult education. With one of the largest populations of young people and adults in Africa, it faces high levels of adult illiteracy, gender disparities in access to learning, and significant regional inequalities. Although, policies exist to promote adult and non-formal education, implementation remains weak and underfunded. At the same time, new initiatives such as the National Digital Literacy Framework (2023) and efforts to integrate adult learning into community development programmes signal a growing recognition of its importance.

This paper explores global and societal issues affecting adult education especially in recent years with a particular focus on Nigeria. It draws on recent empirical studies, international reports and Nigerian policy documents to map the challenges and opportunities confronting the sector. After outlining the theoretical and conceptual framework, it analyses global issues shaping adult education, examines societal factors within Nigeria, and compares practices from other regions. The paper then distils key implications for policy and practice before concluding with recommendations for revitalising adult education as a driver of inclusive development.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper is guided by key adult learning theories and global policy frameworks that help explain and respond to the issues under review. Knowles' andragogy emphasises the self-directed nature of adult learners and the importance of drawing on their prior experiences. Freire's critical pedagogy highlights the transformative potential of adult education to empower marginalised groups through dialogue and collective action. These perspectives underpin the analysis of how adult education can address structural inequalities and promote active citizenship.

The study also situates adult education within the lifelong learning paradigm articulated by

UNESCO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This paradigm frames adult learning as a continuous process across the life course, linking formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities. Nigeria's National Policy on Education and Mass Literacy Programme reflect elements of this paradigm but face persistent implementation challenges. Using these theoretical and policy lenses allows the paper to examine both the drivers and constraints of adult education at global and national levels.

Global Issues in Adult Education

In recent years several interlinked global trends have reshaped adult education. These trends present both challenges and opportunities for policy makers and practitioners. They include the following:

1. Digital Transformation and the Skills Gap: Rapid advances in digital technology have intensified demand for new skills, while exposing digital divides. Adult learners without access to affordable connectivity, devices and digital literacy risk exclusion from education, employment and civic participation. COVID-19 accelerated the shift to online learning but also revealed inequalities in infrastructure and capacity. Programmes in high-income countries such as Singapore's SkillsFuture and Chile's BiblioRedes show how governments can support adult learners to acquire digital skills at scale (OECD, 2021).

2. Migration and Demographic Change: Large-scale migration, ageing populations in some regions and youth bulges in others have created complex educational needs. Adult education systems must cater for migrants, refugees and older workers, while addressing social cohesion. Canada's settlement programmes integrate language training, employment skills and civic orientation for newcomers, offering useful lessons for other contexts (OECD, 2023).

3. Funding Constraints and Shifting Priorities: Many governments reduced public spending on adult education in the wake of economic crises and pandemic-related budget pressures. This has undermined the capacity of adult learning providers, especially in low-and middle-income countries. At the same time, new funding models such as learning accounts and co-financing schemes have emerged in Europe and parts of Asia to diversify revenue sources (OECD, 2023).

4. Climate Change and Sustainability: The climate crisis has heightened the need for adult learning related to green skills, disaster preparedness and community resilience. Programmes in the European Union and parts of Africa are beginning to integrate sustainability into adult curricula, but coverage remains limited (UNESCO, 2022).

5. Post-COVID-19 Recovery: The pandemic disrupted learning for millions of adults worldwide, but also spurred innovation in remote and blended delivery. It highlighted the importance of flexible, learner-centred approaches that combine digital and face-to-face methods, address mental health and provide social support to sustain participation (UNESCO, 2022).

These global trends form the backdrop against which Nigeria's adult education system must operate. Understanding them is essential for designing policies and practices that respond effectively to both global pressures and local realities.

Societal Issues in Adult Education: Nigeria in Comparative Perspective

Nigeria's adult education system reflects many of the global pressures outlined above but is also shaped by its own social, economic and cultural context. Several interrelated factors constrain access, quality and impact. These factors include:

1. Insufficient and Unstable Funding: Budgetary allocations to adult and non-formal education remain minimal compared to other sectors. Programmes rely heavily on donor funding and ad hoc projects. This undermines sustainability, limits coverage and weakens monitoring and evaluation. Without diversified financing mechanisms, Nigeria risks falling further behind its national targets and Sustainable Development Goal commitments.

2. Shortage of Trained Educators: Most adult learning centres are staffed by volunteers or poorly paid facilitators with limited training in andragogy or digital facilitation. Lack of career pathways discourages retention and affects quality. Professionalising the adult education workforce is crucial to improve outcomes.

3. Gender Disparities and Cultural Barriers: Women, especially in rural areas, face multiple barriers including household responsibilities, safety concerns, restrictive norms and lack of childcare. Programmes delivered at inconvenient times or in non-local languages further depress participation. This exacerbates gender gaps in literacy, digital skills and employment.

4. Security Challenges and Regional Inequalities: Security challenges and regional inequalities arising from conflict and ethnic wars lead to insecurity in parts of the North and other regions disrupts programmes, displaces learners and reduces mobility of educators. Regional disparities in infrastructure and economic opportunities also shape participation patterns.

5. Fragmented Policy and Weak Coordination: Although Nigeria has multiple policies and initiatives (National Policy on Education, Mass Literacy Programme, National Digital Literacy Framework) implementation is fragmented across ministries and agencies. This leads to duplication, gaps and weak accountability.

Addressing these societal issues requires both increased resources and better integration of adult education into broader development strategies.

Synthesis

The preceding analysis shows that Nigeria's adult education system faces a convergence of global pressures and domestic constraints. Digitalisation, migration, climate change and funding challenges mirror global patterns, yet Nigeria's inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, policy fragmentation and social inequalities amplify their impact. Comparative experiences from Rwanda, Chile, Singapore and Canada demonstrate that it is possible to design adult learning systems that are more inclusive, better resourced and strategically coordinated. This synthesis highlights the need for Nigeria to integrate lessons from these contexts while tailoring interventions to its unique socio-economic and cultural realities. Doing so will enable adult education to become a transformative force for national development rather than a marginal service.

Comparative and Regional Perspectives on Adult Education

Examining how other regions have responded to similar challenges provides useful insights for Nigeria's adult education sector. While contexts differ, comparative experiences show patterns of innovation and policy commitment that can be adapted locally. They are:

1. Financing and Governance Models: Several European countries have introduced co-financing models where government, employers and learners share the costs of adult learning. For instance, Denmark's adult learning funds and Germany's Federal Employment Agency co-finance training for unemployed adults. These schemes are underpinned by strong legal frameworks and stable funding streams (OECD, 2023). In contrast, most African countries, including Nigeria, rely heavily on public funding with limited employer contributions and weak monitoring. Adaptation of co-financing or voucher systems could reduce the chronic underfunding identified in Nigeria.

2. Digital Inclusion Initiatives: Some middle-income countries have developed national digital skills frameworks specifically for adults. Singapore's SkillsFuture initiative provides credits and curated online courses to all citizens over 25, while Chile's BiblioRedes programme equips public libraries as community technology learning hubs (OECD, 2021). These examples illustrate how partnerships between government, private sector and community institutions can close digital gaps. Nigeria's National Digital Literacy Framework (2023) signals similar intent but requires scaling, sustainable funding and rural outreach.

3. Gender-Responsive and Community-Based Approaches: Rwanda's Adult Literacy and Education for Development programme integrates literacy with health, entrepreneurship and civic education, delivered in local languages with flexible schedules to accommodate women's work and family responsibilities (UNESCO, 2022). In Zambia, targeted women's digital literacy programmes combine skills training with micro-enterprise support (Chikonde, 2024). These models show how aligning adult education with livelihood opportunities and gender-sensitive delivery increases participation and retention.

4. Integration of Indigenous Knowledge: In Botswana and Namibia, adult education curricula have been redesigned to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and local languages. Programmes that reflect

learners' cultural context and everyday experiences achieve higher completion rates and more sustained learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2022). Nigeria's multicultural environment makes this an especially relevant lesson.

5. Cross-Sectoral Coordination: Canada's settlement and integration programmes for immigrants demonstrate how adult education can be embedded across ministries (education, employment, immigration) and delivered through accredited community partners with clear performance metrics. This contrasts with Nigeria's fragmented approach, but also shows a pathway for integrating adult learning with labour, ICT and social protection policies (OECD, 2023).

Synthesis

These comparative experiences reveal that successful adult education systems combine three key features: stable and diversified funding, inclusive and culturally relevant delivery, and strong interagency coordination. While Nigeria faces unique challenges, adapting elements of these models, especially community-based, gender-responsive and digitally enabled approaches, could help overcome the societal and global barriers identified earlier.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The evidence reviewed so far suggests that adult education's potential to advance inclusive and sustainable development remains underrealised, particularly in Nigeria. However, comparative experiences and recent innovations offer practical pathways for improvement. This section distils the key implications for policy makers, practitioners and development partners.

Increase and Diversify Funding

Adult education cannot flourish without stable financing. Nigeria should raise its budgetary allocation to adult and non-formal education beyond the current minimal levels and explore diversified funding mechanisms. Public-private partnerships, employer co-financing and individual learning accounts similar to those in Denmark and Singapore can mobilise additional resources while sharing costs fairly among stakeholders (OECD, 2023).

Strengthen the Adult Education Workforce

Investment in training and professionalising adult educators is essential. Establishing accredited training programmes in andragogy, digital facilitation and inclusive pedagogy within universities and teacher training colleges would improve quality. Incentives such as career pathways and adequate remuneration can reduce turnover and attract qualified personnel, (Onyejekwe and Alade, 2025).

Embed Digital Inclusion

Meeting the 95 percent digital literacy target by 2030 requires more than infrastructure. Nigeria should scale up community-based digital learning hubs, subsidise connectivity for disadvantaged groups, and integrate digital skills into all adult learning curricula. Partnerships with libraries, telecommunication firms and non-governmental organisations as seen in Chile's BiblioRedes and Singapore's SkillsFuture could accelerate progress (PM News Nigeria, 2025; OECD, 2021).

Make Programmes Gender-Responsive and Culturally Relevant

Designing programmes in local languages, scheduling them flexibly, and integrating livelihood skills can

increase participation of women and marginalised groups. Drawing on Rwanda's and Zambia's examples, Nigeria can link literacy and digital training with health, entrepreneurship and civic education to address learners' practical needs (UNESCO, 2022; Chikonde, 2024).

Improve Coordination Across Sectors

Nigeria's multiple policies, including the National Policy on Education, Mass Literacy Programme and Digital Literacy Framework, need an integrated implementation mechanism.

Establishing an interministerial Adult Learning and Skills Council with clear mandates and performance metrics, akin to Canada's coordinated settlement programmes, could reduce fragmentation and improve results (OECD, 2023).

Integrate Adult Education into Broader Development Strategies

Adult education should be systematically incorporated into national strategies on climate change, health, employment and community development. This aligns with UNESCO's call for adult learning to be a cross-cutting driver of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2022).

Synthesis

Taken together, these policy and practice implications amount to a roadmap for revitalising adult education in Nigeria. They emphasise a shift from fragmented, underfunded programmes to an integrated, well-resourced system that is learner-centred, gender-responsive, digitally enabled and culturally grounded.

Conclusion

Adult education remains one of the most powerful yet underutilised instruments for advancing inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. In recent years, global trends such as digitalisation, migration, climate change, funding constraints and the COVID-19 pandemic have reshaped the field, creating both new challenges and opportunities. At the same time, societal factors within countries including Nigeria's chronic underfunding, shortage of trained educators, gender and social inequalities, insecurity, fragmented policy implementation and cultural misalignment have hindered progress.

This paper has shown that adult education cannot be treated as an afterthought. Drawing on recent research and global monitoring reports, it has mapped the major global and societal issues affecting adult education, analysed how these pressures manifest in Nigeria, and compared experiences from other regions to identify promising practices. The analysis reveals that successful adult education systems share several characteristics: diversified and stable funding, professionalised and supported instructors, integrated digital inclusion strategies, gender-responsive and culturally relevant programming, and strong cross-sectoral coordination.

For Nigeria, achieving its national targets such as 95 percent digital literacy by 2030 and fulfilling its commitments under Sustainable Development Goal 4 will require bold policy shifts.

These include significantly increasing investment, strengthening educator training, embedding adult education in broader development strategies, and creating mechanisms for effective interministerial coordination. International partners can support this process by providing technical assistance, sharing best practices and aligning funding with national priorities.

Finally, adult education is not merely a remedial service but a cornerstone of lifelong learning, social inclusion and democratic participation. With sustained political will, adequate resources and innovative delivery models, Nigeria and other countries can transform adult education from a marginal activity into a central pillar of national development in the years ahead.

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