International Journal of Strategic Leadership, Education and Social Sciences (IJSLESS)
Volume-2/Issue-1/January-March, 2026.
Print ISSN: 3115-4417; E-ISSN: 3115-4409.

Original Research Article

ADULT EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN AVENUE FOR SOCIETAL LIBERATION

Kpeno Amon EPHRAIM
Department of Adult Education and Community Development, Faculty of Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria
kpenoephraim@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Adult education has increasingly emerged as a strategic and transformative tool for promoting sustainable development and fostering societal liberation, particularly within developing and marginalized contexts. As many communities continue to grapple with multidimensional challenges (including environmental degradation, persistent poverty, gender inequalities, weak governance structures, and limited access to quality education) adult education offers a critical pathway for building the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for meaningful social change. This paper examined the intersections between adult education and sustainable development, highlighting the ways in which adult learning strengthens civic engagement, enhances economic productivity, promotes environmental stewardship, and advances social justice and equity. Through a review of contemporary literature, the paper illustrated how adult education empowers individuals to challenge oppressive structures, participate effectively in democratic processes, and contribute to community resilience. The paper concluded that the repositioning and strengthening of adult education systems (through policy integration, adequate funding, and community-based delivery models) is essential for achieving long-term societal transformation and meeting global sustainable development aspirations.

Keywords: Adult Education, Sustainable Development, Avenue, Societal Liberation, Nigeria.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Ephraim, K. A. (2026). Adult education and sustainable development: An avenue for societal liberation. *International Journal of Strategic Leadership, Education and Social Sciences, 2*(1), 92-101. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18726560.

Copyright © 2026 IJSLESS

INTRODUCTION

The development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs has emerged as a global imperative for achieving long-term human well-being (WCED, 1987). Attaining this vision requires a population that is knowledgeable, critically aware, and empowered to take informed action in social, economic, political, and environmental spheres. While formal education plays a significant role in shaping such competencies, adult education has become increasingly recognized as an indispensable mechanism for fostering lifelong learning, particularly among populations who have aged beyond traditional schooling systems.

In many developing contexts, including Nigeria and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, adult education serves as a catalyst for human development. It provides opportunities for marginalized adults (women, rural dwellers, unemployed youth, and low-income groups) to acquire essential literacy and numeracy skills, livelihood competencies, civic consciousness, and

environmental awareness (Ebere, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). These learning opportunities not only enhance personal agency but also strengthen community resilience, social inclusion, and participatory governance. Through non-formal, community-based, and continuing education programmes, adult learners are equipped to confront pressing challenges such as poverty, environmental degradation, gender inequality, and weak democratic participation.

Consequently, adult education becomes more than a pedagogical activity; it is a transformative force for societal liberation. It enables individuals to interpret their socio-economic conditions, question oppressive structures and participate meaningfully in collective decision-making, thus, adult education contributes directly to sustainable development. Scholars such as Freire (1970) have emphasized the emancipatory potential of education in freeing individuals from ignorance, dependency, and socio-political marginalization. Within this framework, adult education in Nigeria holds the capacity to reshape community realities by promoting sustainable livelihoods, environmental stewardship, social justice, and inclusive economic growth. Through the linking of knowledge acquisition with practical action, adult education becomes a strategic instrument for reshaping socio-economic and environmental realities, making it central to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national development priorities.

Therefore, this paper examines how adult learning programmes empower individuals and communities to pursue equitable, environmentally responsible, and economically viable futures.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Adult Education

Adult education encompasses all structured learning activities (whether formal, non-formal, or informal) specifically designed to assist adults in improving their literary proficiency, technical skills, socio-political awareness, and overall capacity to function effectively within society (UNESCO, 2021). Unlike traditional schooling, adult education is characterized by flexibility, learner-centered pedagogy, and contextual relevance, as it responds to the diverse needs, past experiences, and responsibilities of adult learners. It includes vocational and technical education aimed at enhancing employability; continuing and professional development programs that support lifelong learning; civic and political education initiatives that strengthen democratic participation; environmental and health education that fosters sustainable lifestyles; and community development programs that build collective problem-solving capacities.

In many developing contexts, adult education serves as a vital mechanism for addressing gaps left by earlier educational disadvantages, enabling marginalized populations (women, rural dwellers, displaced groups, and persons with low literacy) to acquire functional skills that promote socio-economic integration. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes its transformative potential, particularly when it fosters critical thinking, empowerment, and the capacity for individuals to engage actively in societal development. Thus, adult education is not merely a remedial intervention but a strategic tool for human capital development, community empowerment, and sustainable national progress.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development refers to an integrated framework that seeks to harmonize economic advancement, social equity, and environmental integrity, ensuring that present developmental pursuits do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UNDP, 2022). This multidimensional paradigm emphasizes long-term resilience, equitable resource distribution, and the preservation of ecological systems. It requires a shift from exploitative growth models toward development practices that value inclusivity, intergenerational justice, and environmental stewardship.

Central to the realization of sustainable development is the role of informed publics who possess the knowledge, competencies, and motivation to participate in decision-making processes. Effective sustainability efforts depend on broad-based participation, policy literacy, and the capacity to translate knowledge into practical action at household, community, institutional, and national levels. Education (particularly adult and community-based education) provides the cognitive foundation, attitudinal orientation, and behavioral skills necessary for promoting sustainable livelihoods, responsible consumption, environmental conservation, and social cohesion. Hence, sustainable development is not only a technical or economic concept but also an educational and social imperative that requires active citizenship, ethical responsibility, and collective engagement.

Societal Liberation

Societal liberation refers to the transformative process through which individuals and communities break free from the political, economic, cultural, and environmental constraints that limit their autonomy, agency, and well-being. Rooted in the critical pedagogical contributions of Paulo Freire (1970), liberation is conceptualized as both a personal and collective awakening that empowers people to challenge oppressive structures, interrogate dominant ideologies, and assert control over decisions affecting their lives. It entails the development of *conscientização* (critical consciousness), which enables individuals to perceive social injustice and engage in collective action toward social transformation.

In contemporary discourse, societal liberation encompasses efforts to dismantle structural inequalities (gender discrimination, poverty, illiteracy, environmental degradation, political marginalization, and socio-cultural exclusion). It involves enhancing human capabilities, improving access to education and resources, strengthening participatory governance, and promoting socio-economic justice. Adult education plays a pivotal role in this process by providing platforms for dialogue, critical reflection, skills acquisition, and empowerment that equip learners to advocate for change, participate meaningfully in community development, and contribute to the construction of a more equitable and inclusive society.

Eventually, societal liberation transcends individual empowerment; it aspires toward collective emancipation where communities possess the power, knowledge, and resources to shape their developmental trajectories and exercise agency over their socio-political realities.

THE ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Enhancing Environmental Awareness and Action

Adult education equips learners with knowledge on environmental protection, waste management, conservation, climate change, and sustainable agriculture. Through environmental adult education programs, communities understand the consequences of deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable land use, enabling them to adopt eco-friendly behaviours (Adebayo & Omole, 2020).

For example, in rural Nigeria, adult environmental education initiatives have improved community responses to soil erosion, deforestation, and improper waste disposal, supporting the goals of environmental sustainability.

Promoting Economic Empowerment

Sustainable development requires economic systems that enhance human well-being while safeguarding social equity and ecological stability. In this context, adult education serves as a strategic pathway for empowering individuals with the skills, knowledge, and competencies needed to participate effectively in modern economies. Equipping adults with relevant economic and livelihood capacities, adult education promotes self-reliance, reduces structural poverty and strengthens community resilience. Empirical evidence shows that adults who engage in structured learning, particularly in vocational and entrepreneurial programs, experience significant improvements in income levels, productivity, and economic mobility (Okon & Ekong, 2021). As such, adult education is positioned as a critical catalyst for inclusive and sustainable economic development. Adult education fosters economic empowerment through the provision of:

Vocational and Technical Skills

Adult education equips learners with practical, market-relevant skills in areas such as carpentry, ICT, agriculture, mechanics, tailoring, cosmetology, and renewable energy technologies. These competencies increase employability, support entry into skilled labor markets, and help adults respond to evolving technological and industrial demands. In many developing countries, vocational and technical education contributes to workforce development and reduces unemployment and underemployment.

Entrepreneurship Training

Entrepreneurship education enhances adults' ability to create and manage small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Training covers business planning, innovation strategies, market analysis, risk management, and enterprise sustainability. Such education fosters job creation and strengthens local economies, particularly in rural and semi-urban communities where formal employment opportunities may be limited. Entrepreneurial literacy also supports resilience by encouraging diversification of income sources.

Financial Literacy

Financial literacy programs enable adults to make informed decisions about saving, budgeting, credit management, digital finance, and investment. This knowledge is essential in improving household economic stability and safeguarding families from financial shocks. In contexts where financial exclusion is high, especially among women and rural populations, financial literacy promotes access to microfinance institutions, cooperatives, and banking services.

Income-Generating Skills

Adult education provides specialized skills that directly support income generation, such as modern farming techniques, agro-processing, crafts production, digital freelancing, and service-based skills. These competencies help adults develop sustainable livelihoods, enhance productivity, and transition from subsistence-oriented activities to more profitable economic ventures. Income-generating training also enhances food security and economic diversification at household and community levels.

Empowered adults contribute meaningfully to local and national economies, reduce dependency ratios, and participate more actively in community development. Strengthened livelihoods, in turn, support broader sustainable development goals such as poverty reduction, social inclusion, gender equality, and environmental stewardship.

Strengthening Social Inclusion and Equity

Adult education plays a central role in advancing social justice, inclusion, and equitable human development. In many contexts (particularly in low- and middle-income countries) formal education systems often exclude marginalized populations due to socio-cultural, economic, and structural barriers. Adult education therefore functions as a corrective mechanism, providing second-chance learning opportunities for groups historically denied access, including women, rural dwellers, indigenous communities, internally displaced persons, and persons with disabilities (UNESCO, 2021). Through literacy programs, life-skills training, and empowerment-focused pedagogy, adult education enhances individuals' capacity to participate meaningfully in social, political, and economic life.

Furthermore, adult education strengthens social inclusion by fostering communication skills, critical thinking, and social awareness (competencies essential for bridging social divides). In Nigeria and other African countries, community-based adult education initiatives have been instrumental in promoting gender equity, reducing discriminatory practices, and empowering women to participate in leadership and civic processes (Ebere, 2022). Women's education, in particular, has multiplier effects: it improves maternal and child health outcomes, enhances children's school attendance, supports sustainable resource management, and contributes to household economic resilience (UNESCO, 2021). Through creating inclusive learning spaces and addressing structural inequalities, adult education becomes a powerful tool for reducing poverty and building cohesive equitable societies.

Building Civic Competence and Democratic Participation

Sustainable development cannot be achieved without citizens who are knowledgeable, empowered, and engaged in governance and community development processes. Adult education contributes significantly to building civic competence by providing adults with knowledge and skills related to human rights, democratic governance, political literacy, and community participation (UNDP, 2022). Civic-oriented adult education enables learners to understand their rights and responsibilities, participate in electoral processes, engage in public dialogue, and hold leaders accountable. Key thematic areas of adult civic education include:

- Human rights education: strengthening awareness of fundamental freedoms and mechanisms for redress.
- Understanding political processes: enhancing knowledge of electoral systems, governance structures, and policy-making procedures.
- Community engagement: equipping adults with skills to participate in community-based organizations, development committees, and advocacy networks.
- Conflict resolution and peacebuilding: fostering dialogue, negotiation, and non-violent conflict management skills essential for stable societies.

Drawing from Freire's (1970) theory of conscientization, adult education empowers individuals to critically interrogate their social realities, recognize structures of oppression, and take collective action toward social transformation. This critical consciousness is vital for democratic participation and for promoting accountable, transparent governance. In essence, adult civic education not only builds informed citizens but also strengthens democratic institutions, fosters social cohesion, and supports the long-term sustainability of development initiatives.

ADULT EDUCATION AS AN AVENUE FOR SOCIETAL LIBERATION

Liberation through Critical Consciousness

Adult education serves as a vehicle for cultivating *critical consciousness* (the ability of individuals to perceive, analyze, and challenge the socio-economic and political structures that perpetuate inequality). Drawing from Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, adult learning transcends the mere acquisition of literacy or vocational skills; it becomes a process of *conscientization*, where learners are empowered to engage in reflective dialogue, interrogate power relations, and move from passive acceptance to active transformation of their circumstances.

Promoting analytical thinking, democratic participation and experiential learning, adult education equips learners to resist oppressive practices, advocate for their rights, and contribute to the democratization of communities. In many African contexts, critical adult education has strengthened citizens' awareness of governance processes, promoted transparency, and enhanced civic engagement (thereby serving as a foundation for social justice and inclusive development).

Empowerment of Marginalized Groups

Adult education is central to breaking cycles of marginalization rooted in poverty, limited access to schooling, gender discrimination, and political exclusion. Targeted adult education programs

(such as women's literacy classes, skills training for persons with disabilities, and civic education for rural populations) enhance individuals' capabilities to participate meaningfully in society. Women's empowerment programs illustrate this transformative potential: literacy and skills development improve women's reproductive health decision-making, entrepreneurial capacity, financial autonomy, and leadership in community and political spaces. Similarly, adult education initiatives for youth, displaced populations, and minority groups reduce vulnerability and increase social mobility. Through empowerment, adult education thus shifts marginalized groups from positions of dependency to active agents of change capable of shaping their socio-economic futures.

Enhancing Community Self-Reliance

Sustainable development is unattainable without communities capable of identifying their needs, mobilizing resources, and implementing locally relevant solutions. Adult education strengthens community self-reliance by building capacities in leadership, cooperative formation, participatory planning, and local resource management. Programs such as community-extension trainings, agricultural education, environmental adult education, and development-oriented literacy enable communities to organize cooperative societies, manage local enterprises, engage in local governance, and protect natural resources. When communities possess the knowledge and skills required for collective action, they become less dependent on external agencies, development partners, or government interventions. Instead, they drive locally initiated development processes, fostering resilience, sustainability, and ownership of development outcomes.

Promoting Peace and Social Stability

Peace and stability are prerequisites for sustainable development, and adult education plays a crucial role in building these foundations. Peace education initiatives strengthen individuals' abilities to manage conflicts non-violently, embrace diversity, and cultivate tolerance. Furthermore, adult education fosters civic awareness and combats drivers of conflict (such as misinformation, ethnic bias, religious extremism, and socio-economic deprivation). Through conflict resolution training, dialogue forums, community mediation programs, and citizenship education, adult education promotes peaceful coexistence and social cohesion. In fragile or post-conflict societies, adult learning has proven instrumental in rebuilding trust, reconstructing damaged social relations, reintegrating displaced persons, and preventing the recurrence of violence. Thus, adult education not only addresses immediate conflict-related challenges but also builds the long-term social capital necessary for sustained peace and equitable development.

CHALLENGES FACING ADULT EDUCATION IN ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Despite its transformative potential, adult education systems (particularly in developing contexts such as Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa) are confronted with multiple structural, economic, and socio-cultural constraints. These barriers weaken the capacity of adult learning programmes to support sustainable development, lifelong learning, and societal liberation.

Key Challenges

• Inadequate funding from governments and international partners (Nwosu, 2020).
  - Chronic underinvestment limits the establishment of learning centres, recruitment of qualified facilitators, and procurement of instructional materials.
  - Budget allocations for adult education are often overshadowed by priorities in formal schooling, resulting in weak policy implementation.
  - Limited donor engagement and inconsistent international support reduce opportunities for innovation and expansion of non-formal education programmes.
• Low participation rates due to poverty, cultural norms, and work constraints.
  - Many adults prioritize survival-based activities over learning, leading to sporadic attendance and high dropout rates.
  - Cultural beliefs (especially gendered norms) discourage women and other marginalized groups from participating in literacy and skills programmes.
  - Time constraints from livelihood activities, family responsibilities, and informal sector work limit adult learners' availability.
• Poor infrastructure, especially in rural communities.
  - Many adult learning centres lack electricity, adequate seating, potable water, and safe learning environments.
  - Rural areas face geographical isolation, making access to educational services difficult and costly for potential learners.
  - Inadequate infrastructure reduces the quality of instruction and undermines learner motivation and retention.
• Insufficient learning materials, including digital resources.
  - Many programmes rely on outdated or inadequate textbooks, charts, and teaching aids, limiting effective instruction.
  - The digital divide (marked by limited access to computers, internet connectivity, and ICT-based learning tools) hampers efforts to integrate digital literacy into adult education.
  - Lack of contextually relevant materials in local languages creates barriers for learners with low literacy backgrounds.
• Shortage of trained adult educators.
  - Adult education often relies on part-time volunteers or poorly trained facilitators with limited pedagogical skills.
  - Few institutions offer specialized training programmes in adult education methodologies, reducing the pool of competent instructors.
  - Low remuneration and limited career progression opportunities discourage qualified professionals from entering the field.

Recommendations

- Increased public financing is essential for strengthening the adult education sector. Ministries of Education, in collaboration with national planning bodies, should allocate dedicated budget lines to support adult learning centres, instructional materials, capacity-building programs, and the recruitment and retention of qualified facilitators. Evidence from development studies demonstrates that sustained funding enhances program

continuity, improves learning outcomes, and reduces regional disparities in access (Nwosu, 2020). Prioritizing adult education within national budgets also ensures that the sector receives long-term policy support rather than ad-hoc interventions.

- Community-led approaches are vital for ensuring relevance and sustainability. Local institutions (such as community development committees, local NGOs, traditional councils, and faith-based organizations) should design and deliver context-specific environmental education programs. These initiatives can address pressing issues such as waste management, deforestation, climate change adaptation, and sustainable agriculture. When grounded in indigenous knowledge and local realities, community-based programs encourage active citizen participation, strengthen environmental stewardship, and promote behavioural change at the grassroots level.
- Adult education should be explicitly embedded in national development frameworks, including policies on poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and human capital development. Aligning adult education with national objectives (such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)) ensures a coordinated and multisectoral approach to development. Policy integration enables adult learning initiatives to support wider national priorities in health, environment, economic empowerment, and democratic governance, thereby amplifying their developmental impact.
- Effective adult education programs require multi-stakeholder collaboration. Partnerships among government agencies, universities, civil society organizations, private sector actors, and international development partners can enhance program quality, expand coverage, and foster innovation. Universities can contribute through research, curriculum development, and facilitator training, while NGOs play a critical role in community mobilization and outreach. Such collaborative frameworks promote resource-sharing, sustainability, and institutional strengthening, ensuring that adult education programs remain responsive to emerging societal challenges.
- The integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into adult learning offers opportunities for expanding access, especially for marginalized populations who face geographical, economic, or time-related constraints. Digital platforms (such as mobile learning apps, online courses, radio programs, and community ICT hubs) can support flexible, self-paced, and continuous learning. As societies transition into knowledge-based economies, promoting digital literacy and lifelong learning becomes critical for enabling adults to acquire 21st-century skills needed for employment, entrepreneurship, civic participation, and environmental sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Adult education remains indispensable to the pursuit of sustainable development and the broader quest for societal liberation. Beyond literacy, it equips individuals with the knowledge, practical skills, and critical consciousness needed to address socio-economic inequalities, environmental degradation, and political marginalization. In contexts such as Africa (where development challenges are complex and multi-dimensional) adult education functions as a transformative force that empowers communities to participate actively in nation-building, advocate for social justice, and adopt sustainable livelihood practices.

For nations striving toward inclusive and resilient development, investing in adult education is not merely a supplementary strategy but a foundational requirement. Strengthening

adult learning systems fosters human capability, promotes environmental responsibility, and enhances democratic engagement. Ultimately, adult education serves as both a developmental tool and a liberating force, capable of transforming individuals, communities, and entire societies toward a more equitable and sustainable future.

REFERENCES

Adebayo, O., & Omole, F. (2020). *Environmental adult education and community sustainability in Nigeria*. Journal of Environmental Studies, *14*(2), 45-58.

Ebere, P. U. (2022). The Role of Environmental Adult Education in Community Development. *East Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 1* (10), 2063-2076. DOI:10.55927/eajmr.v1i10.1549.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.

Nwosu, C. (2020). Funding adult and non-formal education in Nigeria: Issues and prospects. *Journal of Adult Education and Development*, *12*(1), 88-101.

Okon, E., & Ekong, R. (2021). Skills acquisition, adult education and poverty reduction in Nigeria. *International Journal of Continuing Education*, *6*(3), 112-126.

UNDP. (2022). *Human development report*. United Nations Development Programme.

UNESCO. (2021). *Adult learning and education: The global report on adult learning*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). (1987). *Our common future*. Oxford University Press.