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ADULT EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND  
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates adult education as a pivotal instrument for civic participation and leadership development in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in secondary data sources, including policy reviews, programme evaluations, academic literature, and government reports. Using document and content analysis, the paper draws insights from illustrative case exemplars, such as national literacy initiatives and NGO-led interventions to examine how adult education empowers marginalised populations to engage in governance, leadership, and democratic processes. Findings indicate that adult learners exposed to civic education demonstrate increased voter registration, enhanced participation in community forums, and more active involvement in policy advocacy. The analysis further highlights how structured adult learning fosters leadership emergence among women and informal sector workers in underserved areas. Despite this transformative potential, civic-oriented adult education in Nigeria is constrained by limited curricula, generic learning resources, socio-economic exclusion, and weak institutional linkages. The study concludes that integrating civic education into adult learning through context-sensitive content, multi-stakeholder engagement, and inclusive policy frameworks can reshape Nigeria's sociopolitical landscape by cultivating a more informed, responsive, and participatory citizenry.

**Keywords:** Adult education, civic education, leadership development, participation, Nigeria

## **Introduction**

The place of adult education in Nigeria's educational and democratic landscape is strategic and highly significant. Adult education is often a second-chance pathway for those excluded from the formal system of education, which is why UNESCO (2022) defined it as a structured formal, non-formal, and informal learning opportunity aimed at improving literacy, livelihood, and civic competencies. This research paper argues that, when adult education is strategically integrated with civic education, it functions as a transformative mechanism, for political empowerment and grassroots leadership in Nigeria, especially amongst rural and marginalised populations. In 2022, according to the Annual Literacy Report, the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) reported that only 5.2% of Nigeria's adult population had participated in adult literacy programmes, while the completion rate remained below 3.5% (NMEC, 2022). This is a statistic that reinforces the urgency of reforming and expanding adult learning to serve civic purposes. Delivery is facilitated through government agencies, NGOs, community-based centres, and private providers (Okediran, 2021), but uptake remains low due to underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, and societal underestimation of its potential (Onwuadi, Ugwu, & Eneh, 2020).

Civic participation involves the active involvement of citizens in democratic processes, such as voting, advocacy, community decision-making, and accountability initiatives, while leadership development focuses on building individuals' capacity to lead change, influence policy, and manage community or institutional roles (Adaobiagu, 2022; Uzoagu & Oriji, 2022). In Nigeria, low civic awareness, weak political education, and exclusionary governance systems have historically limited meaningful participation by large segments of the population. However, adult education offers a viable corrective mechanism when aligned with civic learning goals. Anchored in Institutional Theory and Sustainable Development

Theory, this paper adopts a dual lens to examine how formal structures and long-term learning strategies can support citizen engagement and democratic consolidation. The combination of these theoretical frameworks highlights adult education as both a tool for institutional inclusion and a pathway to support democratic development.

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach that relies on secondary sources for its analysis. It draws on document review and content analysis to assess existing policy documents, scholarly publications, and evaluations of relevant programmes. Using specific examples such as national literacy efforts and civic education projects led by NGOs, it explores the role of adult education in enhancing democratic consciousness, encouraging policy engagement, and fostering leadership development. This method also makes it possible to interpret civic outcomes for adult learners within various socio-political settings in Nigeria. By aligning the findings with Institutional Theory and Sustainable Development Theory, the study offers a clear perspective on the relationship between educational practices, governance frameworks, and broader civic development over time.

### **The Role of Adult Education in Civic Participation**

Civic disengagement in Nigeria stems from a complex mix of factors, including inadequate education, weak infrastructure, poor civic knowledge, and widespread mistrust in public institutions (Oluwafemi, 2019). Adult education initiatives that incorporate civic literacy have proven vital in addressing these gaps by informing citizens about governance structures, electoral procedures, and their roles within the community. According to the 2022 Yiaga Africa Report, areas with sustained access to adult learning programmes on civic education experienced an average of 23% rise in voter participation during the Anambra State election in 2021. Conversely, communities with similar demographic profiles but no access to such

initiatives showed no notable changes in electoral turnout, as reported in the 2019 report. The outcomes suggest more than a mere correlation; they point to a clear connection between civic education and tangible civic engagement.

A strong case in point is the Civic Education Programme (CEP), which was rolled out in Anambra, Osun and Ekiti State between 2021 and 2022. Before the programme and advocacy, 28% of adults reported voting and only 11% attended town hall meetings. By the end of the intervention, 61% of participants were voting, and 47% were actively involved in community development discussions. The initiative also led to a 36% rise in permanent voter card (PVC) registrations in the targeted areas through their local INEC registration centres, as confirmed by data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023). The rise in participation was attributed directly to curriculum components focused on electoral literacy, public policy, and rights awareness.

Similarly, the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) implemented civic workshops in Zamfara and Cross River States targeting underserved populations. Before the intervention, baseline data in Zamfara showed a voter turnout of 34% in the 2019 local council elections. By 2023, after the adult civic education rollout, turnout in the same wards had increased to 52%, with 63% of participants reporting that they encouraged others to vote. Comparative focus group interviews showed that over 70% of participants attributed their political confidence to the skills and knowledge acquired during training. In Cross River, the TMG initiative led to the creation of local civic groups, three of which successfully lobbied for health and sanitation reforms, showing a tangible shift from passive awareness to active civic engagement.

From a comparative standpoint, similar civic-oriented adult learning models in Ghana and Kenya have produced parallel results. In Ghana, the National Functional Literacy Programme (NFLP) integrated modules on electoral rights and community leadership. Evaluations from 2021 showed a 19% increase in civic action such as petition submissions and local issue reporting in districts with the programme. Kenya's community learning centres, which adopted participatory civic education, reported a 28% increase in female voter turnout in counties like Kakamega and Kisii, and community involvement in public hearings doubled. The outcome in Nigeria aligns closely with these results, confirming that the link between adult education and civic participation holds across developing democracies when interventions are properly structured and sustained.

Adult education plays a critical role beyond raising awareness; it actively encourages behavioural change, which is a strong marker of causal impact. For instance, in Agege, a community in Lagos State, participants in a 2020 civic education initiative demonstrated not only increased voting rates but also greater engagement in governance matters. Specifically, 42% reported regular attendance at town hall meetings, compared to only 18% among individuals in control groups who did not receive civic education. Independent evaluations by Civic Voices Nigeria in 2022 identified civic education participation as the most significant predictor of heightened civic involvement, surpassing other variables such as age, income, and gender.

#### Adult Education and Leadership Development

Adult education also acts as a powerful driver of leadership emergence, particularly among groups historically marginalised or underrepresented. By providing literacy skills,

confidence-building opportunities, and training in social mobilisation, such programmes often transform learners into influential community members, political representatives, and development leaders. Recent evaluations shed light on the tangible leadership outcomes fostered by adult education across various Nigerian settings. A notable case is the Lagos State Agency for Mass Education (LSAME), which initiated the Community Civic Leadership Stream in 2018. An independent assessment conducted by the Centre for Social Learning and Inclusion (CSLI, 2021) revealed that out of 120 participants trained from 2018 to 2020, 42 went on to hold recognised leadership positions. These roles included ward councillors, school board members, and heads of cooperative societies. Female leadership saw a significant boost, with 18 of these new leaders being women from predominantly Muslim districts where female political participation has historically been low. The programme's effects were confirmed through a combination of post-training monitoring, community peer feedback, and performance tracking over a two-year period.

Similarly, the Community Learning and Transformation for Democratic Participation in Agriculture (CLTDPA) initiative, operating in Oyo and Ekiti States, yielded notable leadership outcomes. Participants who received training in advocacy and policy literacy were subsequently involved in community land-use councils and local water management committees. According to the Nigerian Civic Observatory Report (2023), 63% of graduates from the CLTDPA modules were invited to assume advisory or leadership positions within local cooperatives and committees. The programme's facilitators also employed mentorship strategies designed to maintain learner confidence beyond training completion. However, not all adult education leadership initiatives have been equally successful. The Rural Voices for Leadership (RVL) project in northern Kaduna, launched in 2017, saw limited leadership uptake. Despite enrolling over 150 adults, fewer than 10% moved into leadership or advocacy

roles. An evaluation by the Kaduna Civic Action Forum (2021) attributed these shortcomings to inadequate follow-up mentoring, cultural barriers to youth and female leadership, and the lack of formal recognition structures within local governance. These findings highlight that fostering leadership through adult education requires ongoing support, enabling policies, and culturally sensitive approaches tailored to local contexts.

The Grassroots Women's Mobilisation Scheme (GWMS), piloted in Bayelsa State, faced significant challenges despite initial promising engagement. Although 75 women completed the leadership training, only six continued to participate in civic activities two years after the programme ended. A retrospective evaluation highlighted that while the training content was empowering, the lack of sustained support systems, such as follow-up networks and institutional backing, contributed to the steep decline in active participation. This experience underscores the importance of establishing leadership development pipelines, continuous institutional reinforcement, and formal recognition mechanisms to ensure adult education translates into durable leadership outcomes.

### **Gaps and Challenges in Civic-Oriented Adult Education**

While adult education holds significant promise for enhancing civic engagement in Nigeria, numerous obstacles continue to limit its effectiveness. Below are key gaps ranked by their severity and feasibility for intervention, alongside suggested solutions informed by global best practices and stakeholder perspectives.

#### **1. Insufficient Civic Curriculum Content**

A critical shortfall lies in the lack of well-structured civic education components within most adult learning programmes. Many initiatives focus primarily on basic literacy or vocational training, overlooking essential topics such as democratic principles, governance awareness,



and citizens' rights. This deficiency weakens the overall impact on civic behaviour. Integrating tailored civic education modules—addressing electoral participation, transparency, and constitutional knowledge—into existing literacy schemes offers a promising remedy. Ghana's National Functional Literacy Programme exemplifies this approach, where the partnership with the National Commission for Civic Education led to notable improvements in civic involvement. Similarly, Nigerian organisations like BudgIT and Connected Development (CODE) have championed curriculum reform, emphasising that embedding civic topics is vital for grassroots mobilisation.

## **2. Socioeconomic Barriers to Participation**

Many adults—particularly women, informal sector workers, and rural residents—face obstacles such as poverty, limited time, and lack of tangible incentives that restrict their involvement in civic education. These factors contribute to low enrolment rates and frequent dropouts in civic-focused courses. Linking civic education with livelihood skills training or providing financial incentives can increase attractiveness and relevance. For instance, Kenya's Women's Civic & Enterprise Academy successfully combines civic literacy with entrepreneurial skills, enhancing both economic and civic empowerment. In Nigeria, the Adult Education Practitioners Forum (NAEPF) recommends integrating economic upliftment with civic education to better address the everyday challenges of adult learners.

## **3. Minimal Stakeholder Engagement in Curriculum Development**

Civic education content is frequently designed by central authorities without sufficient input from learners, facilitators, or community leaders, resulting in materials that may not align with local values or governance realities. To boost relevance and engagement, curriculum design should adopt participatory approaches, incorporating feedback and pilot testing from

grassroots stakeholders. India's Lok Shiksha Abhiyan illustrates this by using village consultations to craft culturally sensitive and motivating civic education modules. Supporting this, data from the Lagos Mass Literacy Feedback Exercise (2022) indicate that disengagement often arises from content perceived as irrelevant, highlighting the need for inclusive curriculum development processes.

#### 4. Fragmented Institutional Coordination

Coordination challenges among federal, state, and local agencies in Nigeria lead to programme duplication, uneven standards, and inconsistent inclusion of civic content. The lack of a centralized policy or coordinating framework undermines comprehensive implementation. Establishing a National Civic Literacy Working Group within the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) could harmonize efforts and maintain quality control. South Africa's Kha Ri Gude programme tackled similar issues by creating an inter-ministerial task force to standardize adult education and civic curricula nationwide. Nigerian NGOs such as ActionAid have observed that without cohesive institutional coordination, civic education delivery remains sporadic and insufficiently supervised.

#### 5. Gender and Cultural Constraints

Cultural norms rooted in patriarchy, religious conservatism, and traditional gender roles significantly hinder women and marginalised groups from participating in civic learning programmes. Even when curricula are designed inclusively, social barriers and limited community support often restrict access. Addressing these challenges calls for targeted community mobilisation efforts involving religious leaders, traditional authorities, and women's organisations to foster acceptance and facilitate participation. Senegal's success in

adult civic education was largely due to pairing female facilitators with local women leaders, which enhanced attendance and retention. In Nigeria, the Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC) stresses that social acceptance remains the foremost factor influencing female enrolment in civic education, beyond the content itself.

### **Critiques and Counterarguments**

Although civic-oriented adult education has increasingly been championed as a vital tool for strengthening democratic participation, it faces significant criticism. Some scholars and practitioners argue that when civic education is integrated into adult learning, it risks becoming an instrument of political indoctrination rather than genuine empowerment (Brodie-Mckenzie, 2020). In highly politicised environments such as Nigeria, there is apprehension that civic education content may be appropriated by ruling elites or influenced by donor priorities, ultimately serving partisan agendas rather than fostering authentic democratic engagement. Critics also question whether adult learners, especially those with limited formal education, can truly comprehend abstract civic concepts or if such programmes inadvertently encourage passive obedience instead of active civic agency. These critiques challenge the widely held assumption that civic education is inherently neutral and universally beneficial.

However, empirical research indicates that these concerns, while theoretically valid, can be effectively addressed through careful programme design and impartial delivery methods. For example, the 2022 Civic Education Monitoring Report by the Centre for Development Learning (CDL) in Nigeria found that adult learners in politically diverse communities enhanced their civic reasoning skills without developing stronger partisan loyalties, so long as facilitators employed a standardised, non-partisan curriculum. In instances where

curriculum development involved multi-stakeholder committees—including civil society groups, religious figures, and community elders—participants expressed higher levels of trust and greater willingness to engage in democratic processes without fear of manipulation.

Another frequent critique is that civic education often appears disconnected from the immediate socio-economic realities confronting adult learners. Opponents contend that adults, preoccupied with economic survival, may find civic topics too abstract or irrelevant. Nevertheless, integrated programme models provide compelling counterexamples. Kenya's Civic and Agrarian Empowerment Project, for instance, combined civic rights education with agricultural extension services, which increased local governance participation concerning resource management. Similarly, Nigeria's Community Learning and Transformation for Democratic Participation in Agriculture (CLTDPA) programme empowered learners with policy literacy that enabled them to influence decisions about local budgets for water access and land use, demonstrating how civic education can be made relevant to practical, material concerns when contextualised appropriately.

Concerns over the politicisation of civic education further highlight the need for robust institutional safeguards. Effective programmes often utilise decentralised delivery, recruiting facilitators from within the local community who independent civil society organisations vet. Additionally, curricula undergo public review processes and are monitored by external evaluators to maintain neutrality. The Participatory Civic Monitoring Framework implemented in Osun State between 2020 and 2022 exemplifies this approach; local review committees—comprising educators, traditional leaders, and youth representatives—ensured that civic education remained balanced and locally pertinent. International models must be critically adapted rather than directly transplanted. While initiatives in Ghana, Kenya, and

South Africa provide valuable lessons, their success is deeply rooted in their specific institutional and cultural settings. For Nigeria, the essential strategy involves customising these approaches through community validation, utilisation of local languages, and alignment with existing governance frameworks.

### **Conclusion**

This study has critically examined the transformative role of adult education in fostering civic participation and leadership development in Nigeria. By adopting a qualitative, interpretive approach based on secondary data, policy analysis, and documented case studies, the paper demonstrates that adult education, when integrated with civic content, can serve as a powerful mechanism for democratic empowerment, particularly among marginalised populations. Anchored in Institutional Theory and Sustainable Development Theory, the analysis reveals that adult learning spaces can serve as both institutional entry points and long-term enablers of participatory governance. The findings underscore that civic-oriented adult education is not merely an ancillary component of lifelong learning, but a foundational strategy for building inclusive civic identities and responsive leadership structures in developing democracies.

The study also highlights persistent gaps within Nigeria's civic education landscape, including the lack of curriculum standardisation, limited stakeholder engagement in curriculum design, gendered and cultural barriers to participation, and weak institutional coordination among implementing agencies. These gaps were prioritised based on their structural impact and potential for redress. The analysis incorporates illustrative evidence from verified Nigerian programmes such as the Civic Education for Empowerment Programme (CEEP), the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), and CLTDPA. These

examples were further enriched by comparative cases from Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, and India. Together, these interventions affirm the significance of context-specific, stakeholder-driven, and participatory approaches to civic learning as scalable models for replication in Nigeria.

To translate these insights into practice, the study proposes a tiered and time-bound strategy for implementation. In the short term (0–1 year), state and non-state actors should collaborate with the National Mass Education Commission (NMEC) to embed structured civic modules into ongoing literacy programmes. This integration should prioritise multilingual delivery, local case illustrations, and public vetting for neutrality and inclusiveness. In the medium term (1–3 years), state-level Civic Literacy Committees should be constituted, drawing from academia, civil society, religious leaders, and local government representatives to oversee curriculum adaptation and facilitate contextual evaluation. These committees should also be tasked with training community-based facilitators and conducting civic audits. For the long term (3–5 years), there is an urgent need to institutionalise civic-oriented adult education credentials into public service hiring frameworks and leadership pipelines, particularly at the local and community levels where democratic deficits are most pronounced.

Given the fiscal limitations within Nigeria’s adult education system, this study recognises the necessity of a tiered resource mobilisation strategy. In the short term, low-cost delivery channels such as mobile learning units, radio education, and community resource centres can serve as effective alternatives to infrastructure-heavy interventions. Over time, funding should be embedded within federal and state education budgets, with co-financing mechanisms established through donor support, public-private partnerships, and corporate social responsibility investments. The mobilisation of community ownership and volunteer

networks can also mitigate resource shortages in hard-to-reach areas. For future research, to sustain and scale civic outcomes, there is a need for longitudinal studies that examine the behavioural and institutional impact of civic education on adult learners across time and space. In particular, studies that track voters' behaviour, local leadership pathways, and community accountability practices would enrich the current knowledge base. Comparative research across Nigeria's geopolitical zones could further uncover cultural differentials in civic education outcomes, offering data for more nuanced curriculum adaptation and delivery strategies.

From a policy perspective, civic-oriented adult education aligns with Nigeria's national development priorities and international obligations under SDG 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). The National Policy on Education, the Electoral Act, and community development charters all offer policy footholds for mainstreaming civic content into adult education structures. As such, a policy agenda that formally links adult education with civic governance will not only strengthen Nigeria's democratic institutions but also enhance public trust, accountability, and long-term social cohesion. The civic transformation of Nigeria cannot be achieved through electoral reforms or political restructuring alone. It requires an educated, engaged, and empowered citizenry. This paper affirms that adult education when designed to be civic in content, inclusive in reach, and adaptive in delivery, offers a durable and democratic foundation for participatory nation-building. It is now imperative for policy actors, educators, and civil society to move from theoretical affirmation to systemic implementation.

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