

## **Institutionalising Lifelong Learning Policies to Bridge Educational Inequality in Marginalised Nigerian Communities**

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### **Abstract**

Educational inequality remains a persistent challenge in Nigeria, particularly among marginalised communities with limited access to formal schooling and lifelong learning opportunities. The rigid structure of the country's education system often excludes adults, out-of-school youth, and disadvantaged populations from acquiring essential literacy and vocational skills. Despite global advancements in lifelong learning policies, Nigeria has yet to institutionalise a structured framework that ensures continuous learning beyond childhood. This paper argues that integrating lifelong learning into national education policies is essential for addressing disparities in educational access and fostering inclusive development. This study employs a secondary qualitative research methodology, critically analysing existing literature, policy documents, and international frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The research reviews best practices from countries with successful lifelong learning models, including Finland and Germany, to explore the implications for Nigeria. A thematic approach examines key barriers to lifelong learning in the Nigerian context, including policy fragmentation, inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, and socio-cultural constraints. Findings reveal that a well-structured lifelong learning policy can enhance literacy rates, skill acquisition, and socio-economic mobility in marginalised communities. The study recommends a comprehensive and well-funded framework integrating community-based education, digital learning platforms, and vocational training into Nigeria's national education strategy. By institutionalising lifelong learning, Nigeria can create a more equitable education system, empower disadvantaged populations, and drive sustainable national development.

**Keywords:** educational inequality, lifelong learning, Marginalised communities, Policy framework, Sustainable development.

## Introduction

Education is a powerful tool for social mobility, economic empowerment, and national development. However, Nigeria faces persistent disparities in educational access, particularly among marginalised communities. With over 20 million out-of-school children and millions of adults lacking basic literacy skills, the nation struggles to provide inclusive education for all (Maruatona, 2021). While global education policies increasingly promote lifelong learning to address inequality, Nigeria's system remains heavily reliant on traditional schooling, which excludes those who have aged out of formal education or require flexible learning structures (Okonkwo & Yusuf, 2022). The absence of an institutionalised lifelong learning policy exacerbates these challenges, leaving many without opportunities for skill acquisition, employment, and socio-economic mobility.

Lifelong learning involves the continuous pursuit of knowledge for personal and professional growth, encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal education (European Commission, 2021). Countries like Finland and Germany have successfully embedded lifelong learning into national policies, ensuring access to continuous education regardless of socio-economic background (Schuetze & Casey, 2019). Conversely, the rigid age restrictions and examination-driven structure of Nigeria's education system hinder inclusivity, making it particularly challenging for rural dwellers, women, and displaced persons to access learning opportunities. (PRIO, 2017). Sustainable development is closely linked to lifelong learning, as recognised in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for "inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). However, Nigeria's efforts remain weak due to policy fragmentation, inadequate funding, low public awareness, and a lack of infrastructure for non-formal education (Obanya, 2021). While agencies such as the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) have launched adult education programmes, these initiatives have been short-lived and fragmented, lacking a cohesive policy framework (Biao, 2019).

Institutionalising lifelong learning policies is critical for bridging Nigeria's educational inequality. A structured framework would create alternative learning pathways for those excluded from formal education, equipping them with literacy, vocational skills, and digital competencies (Adeyemi & Olaniyan, 2022). Community-based education, mobile learning technologies, and workplace training can further enhance accessibility, particularly in underserved areas (Dada & Olanrewaju, 2023). This paper argues that lifelong learning should be institutionalised as a core component of Nigeria's education policy. It examines structural barriers, explores best practices, and proposes policy measures to integrate continuous learning into Nigeria's development agenda. Without a deliberate commitment to lifelong learning, the country risks widening educational inequalities, slowing economic growth, and limiting social mobility. A paradigm shift is needed to ensure learning is accessible throughout an individual's lifetime, fostering sustainable development and inclusive progress.

### **Lifelong Learning in Nigeria**

Lifelong learning refers to the continuous acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies throughout an individual's life, enabling adaptability to societal changes, technological advancements, and labour market demands (European Commission, 2021). Unlike traditional education, which follows rigid structures, lifelong learning integrates formal, non-formal, and informal education. It includes adult education programmes, vocational training, workplace learning, community-based education, and digital literacy initiatives (Schuetze & Casey, 2019). By providing opportunities for reskilling and upskilling, lifelong learning ensures that education remains a continuous and accessible process, fostering economic mobility and social inclusion. At its core, lifelong learning promotes adaptability, ensuring individuals remain relevant in a knowledge-based economy. It enhances cognitive development, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities essential for navigating a complex world (Maruatona, 2021). Moreover, lifelong learning fosters civic

participation by equipping individuals with knowledge for informed decision-making and democratic engagement (Brookfield, 2020). Beyond personal development, its societal benefits include higher employment rates, reduced poverty levels, and sustainable economic growth. Countries prioritising lifelong learning tend to have stronger human capital, lower skill gaps, and improved social cohesion (Tuijnman & Boström, 2020). However, despite its developmental significance, Nigeria has yet to institutionalise a comprehensive lifelong learning framework, leaving a significant portion of its population without structured learning opportunities (Obanya, 2021).

Countries with strong lifelong learning frameworks demonstrate how structured policies can bridge educational gaps, enhance workforce productivity, and foster inclusive socio-economic development. Finland, Germany, and Singapore have successfully integrated lifelong learning into national strategies, ensuring equitable access to continuous education. Finland's flexible education system allows individuals to engage in learning at different life stages. The government funds adult education centres, vocational training institutions, and digital learning platforms, ensuring citizens have continuous access to skills development (Tuijnman & Boström, 2020). Additionally, Finland offers free and subsidised adult education programmes, reducing financial barriers that often prevent individuals from pursuing further education (OECD, 2022). This has resulted in high literacy rates, low unemployment, and a workforce that can adapt to evolving labour market demands.

Germany's Dual Education System integrates vocational training with workplace experience, enabling individuals to upgrade their skills and remain competitive in a changing job market (Deissinger, 2021). The German Adult Education Association (DVV) promotes structured adult education programmes, reinforcing a strong lifelong learning culture (Schuetze & Casey, 2019). By aligning education with workforce demands, Germany maintains low youth unemployment and a highly skilled labour force. Similarly, Singapore's Skills-Future initiative is a government-funded lifelong learning programme that provides training grants and incentives at different career stages (Lim, 2021). This initiative emphasises reskilling in high-demand sectors,

ensuring Singaporeans transition into new job roles as industries evolve. By fostering a learning-oriented culture, Skills-Future has enhanced workforce productivity, innovation, and economic resilience, positioning Singapore as a leader in human capital development.

Institutionalising lifelong learning in Nigeria is crucial for addressing challenges such as low literacy rates, high unemployment, and widening skill gaps. Despite the growing demand for skilled labour, Nigeria's education system remains inflexible and heavily focused on examinations, often marginalising adults who have missed formal schooling. (International Policy Digest, 2023). Consequently, millions of Nigerians (particularly in rural and marginalised communities) lack the skills to participate in economic and civic life. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2024) estimates that 31% of Nigerians lack basic literacy skills, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and limiting opportunities for sustainable development.

Lifelong learning is particularly vital in rural and underserved areas, where access to formal education is restricted due to poverty, infrastructural deficits, and socio-cultural barriers (Dada & Olanrewaju, 2023). Community-based education programmes, vocational training, and digital learning platforms can provide alternative learning pathways, ensuring individuals, regardless of age or socio-economic background, acquire relevant skills to improve their livelihoods. Moreover, lifelong learning fosters civic participation, as individuals engaged in continuous education are more likely to contribute to governance, decision-making, and community development (Brookfield, 2020).

Beyond improving literacy and social inclusion, lifelong learning is essential for enhancing Nigeria's labour market competitiveness and economic resilience. The rapid digital transformation of industries requires a workforce that is skilled, adaptable, and continuously learning. Without structured lifelong learning opportunities, Nigeria risks falling behind in global economic competitiveness, as its workforce struggles to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Adeyemi & Olaniyan, 2022). By integrating lifelong learning into national labour

policies, Nigeria can bridge skill gaps, reduce unemployment, and drive industrial growth.

Lifelong learning also aligns with Nigeria's economic diversification agenda, particularly in key sectors such as agriculture, technology, and entrepreneurship. Structured learning programmes focusing on agricultural innovation, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship can empower citizens, reducing dependence on oil revenues and fostering sustainable economic growth (Obanya, 2021). However, the absence of a well-funded lifelong learning policy continues to hinder Nigeria's potential for inclusive development, making it imperative for policymakers to prioritise lifelong learning as a strategic national agenda.

Institutionalising lifelong learning in Nigeria is not just an education policy choice but a developmental necessity. A well-structured lifelong learning framework can transform the country's education system, enhance human capital development, and ensure long-term socio-economic stability. Therefore, the government must implement inclusive, well-funded, and technology-driven lifelong learning policies that empower individuals across all socio-economic backgrounds and contribute to a more equitable and prosperous nation.

### **Gaps in Nigeria's Educational Policies**

A major gap in Nigeria's educational policies is the absence of a structured lifelong learning framework that integrates formal, non-formal, and informal education. While global education embraces continuous learning, Nigeria's policies remain rigid, limiting opportunities beyond formal schooling. The National Policy on Education (NPE) focuses mainly on basic, secondary, and tertiary education, with minimal emphasis on adult education and vocational training (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013). This omission particularly affects rural populations, informal workers, and marginalised communities. Unlike countries such as Germany, where lifelong learning is institutionalised through the *Berufsbildungsgesetz* or Singapore's *Skills-Future Programme*, Nigeria lacks a cohesive system for continuous skill development

(Maruatona, 2021). The fragmentation of policies results in poor coordination between education sectors, restricting access to upskilling opportunities (Obanya, 2021). Without a structured approach, educational inequality deepens, and lifelong learning remains out of reach for many.

Underfunding has significantly weakened policy implementation, leaving many educational initiatives underdeveloped. Despite recommendations for countries to allocate 15-20% of their national budget to education, Nigeria's expenditure remains between 5-7%, affecting literacy programmes, vocational training, and digital learning (NBS, 2024). The National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) suffers from inconsistent funding and bureaucratic inefficiencies, leading to high dropout rates in adult literacy programmes (Umar & Abdullahi, 2021). Poor monitoring and evaluation further hinder policy success, as many educational initiatives lack performance indicators to assess the impact (Dada & Olanrewaju, 2023). Without sustainable financing and structured implementation, lifelong learning policies in Nigeria fail to create meaningful educational access.

Despite the growing role of digital education, Nigeria's policies have not sufficiently integrated technology into learning frameworks. The National ICT in Education Policy acknowledges digital learning, but implementation remains slow, particularly in rural communities (Okebukola, 2021). The absence of an effective e-learning strategy limits opportunities for individuals outside formal education (Eze, 2022). The digital divide further restricts access, as many rural learners lack affordable internet and digital literacy training (Adebayo & Olayemi, 2022). Countries such as Estonia, South Korea, and Finland have incorporated digital learning policies that enable flexible, technology-driven education (OECD, 2022). In contrast, Nigeria's digital learning opportunities remain largely confined to elite institutions, excluding vast segments of the population. Limited investment in digital infrastructure and low digital literacy among educators continue to widen the gap in technology-enhanced learning.

Nigeria's education policies fail to adequately address the needs of marginalised groups, including women, rural populations, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Maruatona, 2021). While global frameworks advocate inclusive learning, Nigeria's policies remain largely uniform, neglecting the structural barriers faced by disadvantaged populations (Dada & Olanrewaju, 2023). For instance, many rural women and informal workers lack access to educational programmes that could enhance their career opportunities (Brookfield, 2020). Despite the growing demand for skilled labour, Nigeria's education system remains inflexible and heavily focused on examinations, often marginalising adults who have missed formal schooling (Eze, 2024). The National Policy on Inclusive Education exists, but enforcement is weak, leading to the continued exclusion of vulnerable groups. IDPs also struggle with education due to instability, lack of documentation, and language barriers (UNHCR, 2022). While UNICEF supports education for IDP children, there are no comprehensive policies addressing the lifelong learning needs of displaced adults. This oversight reinforces socio-economic marginalisation, trapping vulnerable populations in cycles of poverty.

A critical gap in Nigeria's education system is its misalignment with labour market demands. The emphasis on theoretical knowledge over practical skills creates a workforce ill-equipped for industry needs (Adeyemi & Olaniyan, 2022). Many graduates face unemployment due to skills mismatches and insufficient vocational training (World Bank, 2023). Countries such as Germany and Switzerland link vocational education to industry demands, ensuring smooth school-to-work transitions (OECD, 2022). Nigeria lacks similar structures, limiting career progression opportunities for both young graduates and adult learners seeking reskilling (Obanya, 2021). Additionally, weak industry-academic collaboration has led to outdated curricula that do not align with job market needs. The absence of strong workplace learning opportunities further hinders employment prospects, preventing the development of a globally competitive workforce.

### **Institutionalising Lifelong Learning**

A strong legislative framework is essential for embedding lifelong learning in Nigeria's development strategy. Despite policies such as the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the National Policy on Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education, there is no binding law ensuring continuous learning across all age groups (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013). Countries like Germany and Finland have robust legal structures integrating lifelong learning into national planning, ensuring consistent funding and implementation (Maruatona, 2021). Nigeria requires a National Lifelong Learning Act mandating structured adult education, vocational training, and digital skills development. This law should establish clear roles for the government, private sector, and civil society while guaranteeing access for marginalised populations (ETF, 2024). A Lifelong Learning Coordinating Agency (LLCA) should also be established to harmonise policies across sectors such as education, labour, and technology, preventing fragmented implementation (Adeyemi & Olaniyan, 2022). Without a legal framework, lifelong learning initiatives will remain underfunded and disconnected from national economic and social development goals. A legislative approach ensures sustainability and alignment with global best practices in lifelong education.

Community-Based Learning Centres (CBLCs) are critical for expanding lifelong learning, particularly in underserved areas. Many Nigerians lack access to continuous education due to economic barriers and socio-cultural constraints (Brookfield, 2020). CBLCs provide flexible, localised education for adults, informal workers, and out-of-school youth, addressing this gap (Obanya, 2021). Thailand and Bangladesh successfully integrate CBLCs into national education policies, offering literacy programmes, vocational training, and digital skills development (Maruatona, 2021). Nigeria should adopt a similar model, embedding CBLCs into its education system and securing sustainable funding through public-private partnerships (Dada & Olanrewaju, 2023). CBLCs must be tailored to community needs. Rural centres should focus on agricultural innovation, financial literacy, and cooperative

management, while urban centres can emphasise entrepreneurship and digital skills (Adebayo & Olayemi, 2022). Mobile education services and open-access digital platforms should also be incorporated to enhance reach. State and local governments should be legally mandated to establish CBLCs, ensuring formal integration into the broader education and workforce system (Umar & Abdullahi, 2021). Without widespread CBLCs, millions of Nigerians, particularly in rural areas, will remain excluded from lifelong learning opportunities.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are crucial for scaling lifelong learning initiatives. Government resources alone cannot meet national lifelong education demands, making private sector involvement essential (World Bank, 2023). Germany's Dual Vocational Training System and Singapore's Skills-Future Programme illustrate the effectiveness of government-industry collaboration in workforce development (OECD, 2022). In Nigeria, private sector engagement is limited, with most investment concentrated in elite institutions, leaving public institutions underfunded (Okebukola, 2021). According to This Day Live, the government should incentivise private investment in adult education, vocational training, and digital learning through tax incentives, grants, and regulatory support (James, 2023). CSR initiatives should be leveraged to fund workplace training and community education for low-income groups (Adeyemi & Olaniyan, 2022). A Workplace Learning Policy should be adopted, mandating structured on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and digital learning modules to enhance workforce skills (Dada & Olanrewaju, 2023). Strengthening university-industry partnerships will also bridge skill gaps, ensuring education aligns with labour market demands. Without robust PPPs, lifelong learning efforts will remain fragmented and underfunded, limiting their impact on national development.

Technology is transforming education worldwide, yet Nigeria lags in integrating digital learning into its lifelong education policies (Eze, 2022). Countries such as South Korea and Estonia have developed national digital learning strategies that provide widespread access to online courses, virtual classrooms, and AI-driven

learning (OECD, 2022). However, Nigeria faces challenges related to internet access, digital literacy, and ICT infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Adebayo & Olayemi, 2022). To institutionalise technology-driven learning, Nigeria needs a National Digital Learning Strategy (NDLS) that prioritises e-learning, mobile education, and AI-enhanced learning platforms (Brookfield, 2020). Key focus areas should include:

1. Expanding Digital Infrastructure Investments in broadband access, free public Wi-Fi zones, and community digital hubs will bridge the digital divide (World Bank, 2023).
2. Developing Open Educational Resources (OERs) Government-backed MOOCs, digital libraries, and self-paced learning platforms should be widely accessible (Maruatona, 2021).
3. Enhancing Digital Literacy Adult education programmes must integrate digital skills to enable full participation in technology-driven education (Okebukola, 2021).
4. AI and Personalised Learning AI-driven platforms should be used to provide adaptive, individualised learning experiences (Adeyemi & Olaniyan, 2022).

Public-private partnerships should be leveraged to fund and develop EdTech solutions, ensuring affordability, inclusivity, and sustainability. Without strategic investment in digital learning, Nigeria risks falling behind in the global knowledge economy, limiting both workforce development and national economic progress.

### **Addressing Policy and Practical Objections**

Some critics argue that Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) already provides for adult and non-formal education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013). However, these policies remain fragmented, underfunded, and inconsistently implemented, lacking a structured lifelong learning system (Sele & Mukundi, 2024). Unlike developed nations with comprehensive lifelong learning laws, Nigeria lacks a unified framework integrating formal, non-formal, and informal education (Adeyemi

& Olaniyan, 2022). Another argument is that lifelong learning is less urgent than basic education deficits and economic instability (Obanya, 2021). However, neglecting lifelong learning worsens unemployment, limits workforce adaptability, and hinders national progress (World Bank, 2023). Countries like Singapore and Finland, despite strong basic education systems, prioritise lifelong learning for economic competitiveness and social mobility (OECD, 2022).

Critics also highlight financial constraints, arguing that the government lacks resources for large-scale adult education (Dada & Olanrewaju, 2023). However, public-private partnerships (PPPs) can bridge funding gaps through corporate investment, international grants, and community-driven initiatives (Maruatona, 2021). Technology-driven learning solutions, such as MOOCs, mobile applications, and virtual skills training, provide cost-effective alternatives to traditional classroom learning (Eze, 2022). Some sceptics question whether adults will engage in lifelong learning due to work obligations, low motivation, and socio-cultural attitudes (Brookfield, 2020). However, participation increases when learning is flexible, economically beneficial, and community-driven (Adebayo & Olayemi, 2022). Countries with successful lifelong learning systems integrate workplace education, community-based training, and incentive-driven programmes to boost adult engagement (OECD, 2022).

Addressing these concerns requires coherent policies, strategic funding, and a national shift toward viewing lifelong learning as vital for sustainable development. Through legislation, community engagement, and digital innovations, Nigeria can create a more inclusive, knowledge-driven society.

## **Conclusion**

Institutionalising lifelong learning is not merely an educational reform but a strategic imperative for achieving equity, economic progress, and sustainable development in Nigeria. The persistent gaps in the country's educational policies, coupled with the challenges of adult illiteracy, skills obsolescence, and social exclusion, necessitate a

systematic and inclusive approach to lifelong learning. Without a structured framework that integrates legislation, community-based learning, public-private collaboration, and technology-driven solutions, marginalised communities will continue to suffer from limited access to quality education and socio-economic opportunities.

To bridge this gap, the Nigerian government must adopt a legally binding lifelong learning policy, ensuring that education extends beyond formal schooling to accommodate learners of all ages. Sustained investment in infrastructure, digital learning platforms, and grassroots educational initiatives will enhance accessibility and participation. Moreover, fostering a culture of continuous learning through community-driven engagement, corporate sector involvement, and international best practices will ensure that lifelong learning becomes a functional reality rather than a policy aspiration. A decisive commitment to lifelong learning will empower individuals, strengthen communities, and drive national development. The time to act is now. By institutionalising lifelong learning through strategic policies, robust funding mechanisms, and inclusive educational models, Nigeria can build a future where learning is truly lifelong, equitable, and transformative.

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