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AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECT OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND LITERACY ON POVERTY REDUCTION IN NIGERIA (1998–2022)

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ABSTRACT

Poverty remains a persistent development challenge in Nigeria despite sustained investments in workforce development programmes. This study is motivated by the need to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions and to examine the role of foundational human capabilities in driving poverty reduction. Specifically, the study investigates the impact of workforce development and literacy on poverty reduction in Nigeria over the period 1998 to 2022. The study adopted a quantitative research design and utilized secondary time-series data, which were analyzed using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression techniques. The study is anchored on the capability approach (CA), which emphasizes the expansion of individuals' freedoms and opportunities as the core objective of development. The findings reveal that literacy has a statistically significant negative effect on poverty, indicating that improvements in literacy enhance access to economic opportunities and living standards. However, workforce development programmes show no statistically significant impact, reflecting challenges such as weak implementation, inadequate funding, and poor alignment with labour market demands. The study concludes that literacy plays a more critical role in reducing poverty and recommends increased investment in education, improved programme design, and policies that promote sustainable employment and inclusive economic growth.

Keywords: *Workforce development, literacy, poverty reduction, Nigeria*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Poverty remains a persistent challenge in Nigeria despite the country's abundant natural and human resources. A large proportion of the population continues to face low income levels, unemployment, and limited access to economic opportunities (World Bank, 2022). Traditional poverty reduction strategies, largely centered on direct interventions and short-term welfare programmes, have produced limited and unsustainable outcomes. This has shifted policy focus toward empowerment-based approaches that emphasize the development of human capabilities, particularly literacy and workforce development, as sustainable pathways out of poverty.

Literacy is a fundamental component of human capital development, as it enhances individuals' ability to acquire knowledge, process information, and participate effectively in economic activities. Higher literacy levels improve employability, productivity, and income-earning capacity, thereby contributing to poverty reduction (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2016). In developing economies like Nigeria, where a significant proportion of the population lacks basic education, improving literacy is essential for enabling individuals to benefit from labour market opportunities.

Similarly, workforce development plays a crucial role in strengthening labour market participation by preparing individuals for employment and productive engagement. It contributes to economic inclusion by enhancing the capacity of individuals to secure and retain jobs in a dynamic economic environment (Osalor, 2021). However, despite various policy interventions, the impact of workforce development programmes on poverty reduction in Nigeria has remained limited due to challenges such as inadequate funding, weak implementation, and poor alignment with labour market demands (Bello & Yusuf, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the effect of workforce development and literacy on poverty reduction in Nigeria, with a view to providing empirical evidence to guide effective policy formulation.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In an ideal situation, a country like Nigeria, endowed with abundant natural resources and a large youthful population, should achieve sustained economic growth, generate employment, and significantly reduce poverty through effective human capital development. Accordingly, successive governments have implemented policy interventions aimed at this ideal, including educational reforms such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, literacy campaigns, and workforce development initiatives such as the Industrial Training Fund (ITF), the National Apprenticeship Scheme (NAS), and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) schemes. Despite these interventions, poverty and unemployment remain persistently high, with over 40% of Nigerians living below the poverty line and youth unemployment at critical levels (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Previous studies have shown mixed outcomes regarding the effectiveness of these programmes, revealing persistent gaps between available skills and labour market demands, inadequate coverage, and weak alignment with economic opportunities (Bello & Yusuf, 2020; Adebayo, 2021). Consequently, there is limited evidence on the precise role of workforce development and literacy in reducing poverty in Nigeria, creating a critical knowledge gap. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how workforce development and literacy can enhance employability, income generation, and overall poverty reduction in the country. Against this

backdrop, this study seeks to answer the following research question: To what extent does workforce development and literacy rate influence poverty reduction in Nigeria?

1.3 Research Objectives

Broad Objective: The broad objective of this study is to examine the effect of workforce development on poverty reduction in Nigeria.

Specific Objectives:
1. To analyze the effect of workforce development on poverty reduction in Nigeria.
2. To examine the effect of literacy on poverty reduction in Nigeria.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H_{o1}: Workforce development has no significant effect on poverty reduction in Nigeria.
H_{o2}: Literacy has no significant effect on poverty reduction in Nigeria.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study addresses the critical issue of poverty reduction in Nigeria through workforce development. By examining the effectiveness of existing programs, the research contributes valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders seeking to design and implement effective interventions. Understanding the relationship between skills development and poverty alleviation can inform strategic initiatives that enhance economic resilience and empower marginalized populations, particularly youth. Furthermore, this study adds to the existing body of literature on skills acquisition, offering a framework for future research and policy formulation. Ultimately, the findings aim to promote sustainable development and improve the livelihoods of millions in Nigeria.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study examines the role of workforce development on poverty reduction in Nigeria from 1998 to 2022, a period that covers key policy initiatives such as the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). It focuses on the impact of these programs on poverty alleviation and employment, particularly among youth and marginalized groups, using time series data to assess the alignment between skills development initiatives and labour market demands.

The study is limited by potential gaps and inconsistencies in data over the 24-year period, which may affect the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Additionally, the quantitative focus may restrict insights into beneficiaries' experiences, while external factors such as global economic fluctuations and the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced program outcomes but cannot be fully accounted for.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Concept of Workforce Development

Workforce development is a core component of Human Capital Development (HCD) that involves improving skills, knowledge, and employability through training and entrepreneurial support (World Bank, 2014). It aligns labor force capabilities with market demands, thereby reducing unemployment and skill gaps. It also enhances productivity, supports income generation, and promotes poverty reduction. Overall, workforce development links human capital investment to improved economic outcomes.

Concept of Literacy

Literacy refers to the ability to read, write, and effectively use information for personal and economic purposes (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2016). Within the context of Human Capital Development (HCD), literacy is a fundamental skill that enhances individuals' capacity to acquire knowledge, develop competencies, and participate productively in the economy (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1993).

It serves as a foundation for education, skill acquisition, and workforce participation, thereby improving productivity, income levels, and overall economic well-being (World Bank, 2020). Consequently, higher literacy levels contribute significantly to human capital formation and sustainable economic development.

2.1.2 Concept of Poverty Reduction

Poverty refers to a condition in which individuals are unable to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education due to low income and limited access to opportunities (Ravallion, 2016; World Bank, 2020). It also reflects deprivation in human capabilities and social exclusion within the economy (Sen, 1999).

Poverty reduction, therefore, involves policies and strategies aimed at improving living standards, increasing income, and expanding access to economic opportunities. In relation to workforce development, poverty reduction is achieved through skill acquisition, vocational training, and employment creation, which enhance individuals' productivity and earning capacity (Becker, 1993; World Bank, 2014).

Similarly, literacy is fundamental to poverty reduction, as it equips individuals with the basic ability to read, write, and access information necessary for education, skill development, and labor market participation (UNESCO, 2017). Higher literacy levels improve employability and income potential, thereby reducing poverty.

Thus, workforce development and literacy jointly contribute to poverty reduction by strengthening human capital, increasing productivity, and promoting sustainable economic advancement.

2.2 Review of Basic Theories

2.2.1 The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, propounded by Amartya Sen (1999), emphasizes that poverty is not merely low income but a deprivation of fundamental freedoms and capabilities that enable individuals to lead lives they value. The approach assumes that individuals have different abilities to convert resources into valuable outcomes, meaning that access to education, literacy, and workforce development can expand real opportunities and well-being. In the Nigerian context, where unemployment and poverty remain high despite abundant human and natural resources, the capability approach is highly relevant as it shifts focus from mere financial assistance to empowering citizens through human capital and skills development. This theory underpins the study's focus on literacy and workforce development as key tools for poverty reduction.

2.2.2 The Structural Poverty Theory

The Structural Poverty Theory, often associated with Myrdal (1968) and other development economists, posits that poverty persists due to systemic and institutional factors such as inequality, weak governance, inadequate infrastructure, and labor market inefficiencies. The

theory assumes that social and economic structures can constrain access to resources and opportunities, thereby limiting upward mobility. In Nigeria, this theory is particularly applicable given persistent disparities in education, employment, and income, which hinder the effectiveness of policy interventions. Structural Poverty Theory complements the capability approach by highlighting the broader social and institutional barriers that must be addressed alongside individual empowerment strategies.

Together, these theories provide a robust framework for understanding poverty in Nigeria. The capability approach offers a lens to evaluate how literacy and workforce development expand individual capabilities, while structural poverty theory contextualizes the systemic challenges that affect the success of these interventions. Using these complementary perspectives allows for a nuanced analysis of poverty reduction strategies in the country.

2.3 Empirical Review

2.3.1 Workforce Development and Poverty Reduction

Studies have consistently shown that workforce development initiatives can improve employment outcomes and reduce poverty. Adebayo, et al, (2017) examined workforce development programs under the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) in Lagos State, from 2012 to 2016. Using regression analysis on employment, income, and program participation, they found that structured workforce programs significantly enhanced youth employability and income, although limited funding and poor monitoring reduced overall effectiveness. Similarly, Oluwatobi and Ogunrinola (2020) studied entrepreneurship and skills training programs in South-West Nigeria between 2015 and 2019, using regression analysis on graduate employment and self-reliance indicators. They reported that participation in these programs improved employability and reduced poverty. Internationally, Hicks, et al, (2020) evaluated Kenya's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs from 2015 to 2019 using randomized control trials and regression. They found that workforce programs increased labor market participation and earnings, though poverty reduction effects were gradual. Collectively, these studies validate that workforce development is a key strategy for reducing poverty, but challenges like program reach, funding, and monitoring remain.

2.3.2 Literacy and Poverty Reduction

Literacy is a critical factor that enhances the effectiveness of poverty reduction strategies. Okafor and Nwankwo (2014) investigated adult literacy and vocational training programs in Enugu State, Nigeria, between 2008 and 2013. Using survey data analyzed via multiple regression on literacy, income, and employment outcomes, they found that literacy significantly improved participants' ability to benefit from vocational training, increasing self-employment and income levels. Ahmed, et al, (2019) assessed vocational skills acquisition programs in Katsina State, Nigeria, using 2017 survey data on literacy, income, and employment. They reported that higher literacy levels enabled participants to effectively utilize skills training, contributing to better livelihoods, although limited trainer capacity and poor infrastructure constrained broader impact. Globally, Gertler et al. (2016) examined literacy programs in several developing countries from 2010 to 2015, using survey-based regression analysis. They concluded that literacy enhances individuals' capacity to engage in economic activities, leading to reduced poverty, and serves as a foundation for effective workforce development programs. Overall, these studies indicate that literacy not only directly contributes to poverty reduction but also amplifies the impact of workforce development interventions.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the effect of workforce development on poverty reduction in Nigeria. Secondary time-series data covering 1998 to 2022 will be analyzed using appropriate econometric techniques to assess the relationships among the variables.

The study is anchored on the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), which conceptualizes poverty as the deprivation of freedoms and opportunities necessary for individuals to achieve well-being. Within this framework, workforce development and literacy are seen as critical interventions that expand capabilities, promote economic participation, and reduce poverty.

3.2 Empirical Model Specification

We adopted and modified the model used on the works of Adebayo et al, (2017), who examined workforce development programs under the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) in Lagos State (2012 to 2016) and the study found that structured workforce programs significantly improved youth employability and income using regression analysis. This study extends their framework by incorporating workforce development, literacy (education), and control variables—GDP growth rate and unemployment rate, using annual time-series data from 1998 to 2022. The relationships among the variables were analyzed with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, providing a robust quantitative assessment of how these factors influence poverty reduction in Nigeria.

$PR=\beta_0+ \beta_1WD+\beta_2LTR+ \beta_3\ GDPGR + \beta_4UNEMPL+ \mu$

Where:

PR = Poverty reduction (proxied by poverty headcount ratio)
WD = Workforce development (Investment in workforce development)
LTR = literacy rate
GDPGR= gross domestic product growth rate (control variable)
UNEMPL= unemployment rate (control variable)
$\beta 0$ = Intercept
$\beta_1-\beta_4$ = Parameters to be estimated
μ= Error term

Explanation of Variables

Poverty reduction (PR), the dependent variable, was proxied by the poverty headcount ratio, which measures the proportion of the population living below the poverty line, workforce development (WD) is proxied by investment in workforce development, indicating improvements in labour force quality. Literacy rate (LTR) represents the percentage of the population that can read and write and serves as a key human capability. Gross Domestic Product growth rate (GDPGR) and unemployment rate (UNEMPL) are included as control variables to capture overall economic performance and labour market conditions, respectively. The intercept (β_0) represents the constant term, β_1–β_4 the estimated coefficients, and μ captures other unobserved factors affecting poverty reduction.

3.3 Estimation Techniques

The study applied multiple linear regression analysis using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) to examine the effects of workforce development and literacy rates on poverty reduction in Nigeria. Descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and regression coefficients generated in SPSS (2024) were used to assess relationships between variables and overall model fit. R-squared

values measured the proportion of variance in poverty reduction explained by each predictor, while t-tests and p-values determined the statistical significance of individual variables.

The adoption of this time-series regression model is justified because it enables the analysis of trends over time and the quantification of each variable's contribution to poverty reduction. Unlike cross-sectional survey studies, this approach incorporates multiple explanatory variables, enhancing the explanatory power and providing a robust, data-driven framework for policy formulation on workforce development and literacy initiatives.

3.5 Evaluation of Estimates

The evaluation of the estimated models focused on the statistical significance, explanatory power, and reliability of the regression results. The t-statistics and corresponding p-values were employed to assess the significance of individual coefficients, while the F-statistic was used to evaluate the overall goodness-of-fit of the model. In addition, the coefficient of determination (R-squared) was utilized to measure the proportion of variation in poverty reduction explained by the explanatory variables. Emphasis was placed on the interpretation of the magnitude, direction, and statistical significance of the estimated coefficients, as derived from the SPSS outputs.

3.6 Test of Research Hypothesis and Decision Rule

The research hypotheses will be tested using the t-statistic and F-statistic from the regression analysis. The decision rule is based on the significance level (typically 5%). If the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis (H_0) will be rejected, indicating a statistically significant relationship between skills acquisition, workforce development, and poverty reduction. Conversely, if the p-value exceeds 0.05, H_0 will not be rejected. The results will guide conclusions on the impact of these programs on poverty reduction in Nigeria.

4. RESULTS PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Results on the effect of Workforce Development on Poverty Reduction

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.304[a]	.093	.053	11.9214

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	333.603	1	333.603	2.347	.139[b]
	Residual	3268.779	23	142.121		
	Total	3602.382	24			

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Erro	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-.293	38.417		-.008	.994
	Workforce Development (WD)	1.038	.677	.304	1.532	.139

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

From the result of the analysis carried out, the model that define the role of workforce development on Poverty Reduction is given by multiple linear regression model as contained in the table above. From the table, the regression model is given by:

$$PR= \beta 0 + \beta_1 WD+ \beta_3 GDPGR + \beta_4 UNEMPL+ \mu$$

That is
Poverty Reduction = β_0+ β_1 Investment in workforce development+ β_3Economic Growth + β_4Unemployment rate+ Error Term

The above model is a multiple linear regression model that defines the role of workforce development on Poverty Reduction. According to the analysis, the Workforce Development (WD) has a moderate relationship on poverty reduction, with an R-squared value of 0.093. This means that approximately 9.3% of the variance in Poverty Reduction can be explained by Workforce Development. The coefficient for Workforce Development is 1.038, suggesting a moderate relationship between Workforce Development and Poverty Reduction. Workforce Development model is not statistically significant at the 5% level, with p-values more than 0.139. This indicates that the variable Workforce Development does not have a significant impact on Poverty Reduction in Nigeria.

4.3 Results on the effect of Literacy Rate on Poverty Reduction

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.703[a]	.494	.472	8.9057

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1778.212	1	1778.212	22.421	.000[b]
	Residual	1824.170	23	79.312		
	Total	3602.382	24			

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	148.108	19.018		7.788	.000
	Literacy Rate (%) LTR	-1.501	.317	-.703	-4.735	.000

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

From the result of the analysis carried out, the model that defines the Literacy Rate on Poverty Reduction is given by multiple linear regression model as contained in the table above. From the table, the regression model is given by:

$PR = \beta_0 + \beta_2 LTR + \beta_3 GDPGR + \beta_4 UNEMPL + \mu$

That is
Poverty Reduction = β_0 + β_2Literacy Rate + β_3 Economic Growth + β_4Unemployment rate+ Error Term

The above model is a multiple linear regression model that defines the Impact of β_2Literacy Rate on Poverty Reduction. According to the analysis, the Literacy Rate (LTR) has a very strong relationship on poverty reduction, with an R-squared value of 0.494. This means that approximately 49.4% of the variance in Poverty Reduction can be explained by Literacy Rate. The coefficient for Poverty Reduction is -1.501, suggesting a strong relationship between Literacy Rate and Poverty Reduction. Literacy Rate model is statistically significant, with p-values less than 0.001. This indicates that the variable Skills Acquisition has a significant effect on Poverty Reduction in Nigeria.

4.4 Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1:
H0: Workforce development (WD) has no significant effect on poverty rate in Nigeria.
H1: Workforce development (WD) has a significant effect on poverty rate in Nigeria.

Effect of Workforce Development (WD) on Poverty Rate

SN	Variable	N	Mean	STD	R	Significance Value
1	Workforce Development (WD)	25	56.604	3.5924	0.304	0.139
	Poverty Rate (%)	25	58.452	12.2515		

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

From the results of the analysis shown above, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient between Workforce Development (WD) and Poverty Rate is 0.304. This indicates a moderate positive correlation between workforce development and poverty rate reduction, meaning workforce development has some influence on reducing the poverty rate in Nigeria.

However, the significance value of 0.139 is greater than 0.05, indicating that the relationship between Workforce Development (WD) and Poverty Rate is not statistically significant.

Since p-value = 0.139, which is greater than 0.05, we fail to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that Workforce Development (WD) does not have a significant effect on poverty reduction in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2:
H0: Literacy rate (LTR) has no significant effect on poverty reduction in Nigeria.
H1: Literacy rate (LTR) has a significant effect on poverty reduction in Nigeria.

Effect of Literacy Rate (LTR) on Poverty Rate

SN	Variable	N	Mean	STD	R	Significance Value
1	Literacy Rate (LTR)	25	59.724	5.7340	0.703	< 0.001
	Poverty Rate (%)	25	58.452	12.2515		

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

The results of the analysis show that the Pearson Correlation Coefficient between Literacy Rate (LTR) and Poverty Rate is 0.703, indicating a strong negative correlation between literacy rates and poverty. This means that as literacy rates increase, the poverty rate decreases significantly.

The significance value of <0.001 is less than 0.05, indicating that there is a statistically significant relationship between Literacy Rate (LTR) and Poverty Rate.

Since p-value < 0.001, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis, concluding that Literacy Rate (LTR) has a significant negative effect on poverty rate in Nigeria. For every increase in literacy rate, there is a significant reduction in poverty.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The study finds that workforce development has no significant impact on poverty reduction in Nigeria, while literacy rate significantly reduces poverty. Using the capability approach

(CA) this suggests that poverty is reduced when people have real opportunities to use their abilities effectively.

Workforce participation often involves low-paying or unstable jobs that do not raise income sufficiently. In contrast, literacy equips individuals with knowledge and decision-making abilities, improving access to opportunities and enabling meaningful participation in the economy.

These findings indicate that enhancing basic capabilities, particularly literacy, is crucial for sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria.

5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

This study sought to examine the relationship between Workforce Development, Literacy rate and poverty reduction in Nigeria, using quantitative methods and time series data. The study tested the hypothesis that workforce development did not significantly impact poverty reduction, while literacy rates have a significant effect. The findings indicated that workforce development do not have a statistically significant effect on poverty reduction in Nigeria. However, literacy rates were found to have a significant negative effect on poverty, meaning that higher literacy rates contribute to poverty alleviation.

The lack of significant impact from workforce development can be attributed to several factors. These include lack of alignment between skills taught and labor market needs, and the prevalence of underemployment in the Nigerian economy. On the other hand, literacy rates showed a strong correlation with poverty reduction, reinforcing the argument that foundational education is critical for economic empowerment.

5.2 Conclusion

The study concludes that while workforce development are essential components of any poverty reduction strategy, their effectiveness in the Nigerian context is limited by structural issues such as unemployment, underemployment, and misalignment with market demands. Literacy, however, proves to be a more powerful tool in reducing poverty, as it equips individuals with the fundamental capabilities to participate meaningfully in the economy. This suggests that a stronger emphasis on improving basic education and literacy should be prioritized in poverty reduction policies.

Thus, the current focus on workforce development programs in Nigeria requires a strategic overhaul to make them more effective. Addressing the structural challenges within the labor market and ensuring that these programs align with economic needs will be key to their success.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government, particularly the Federal Ministry of Education, should strengthen literacy programs by ensuring access to quality basic education for all citizens, especially in rural areas, in order to improve individuals' capacity to participate effectively in the economy.

2. Government and the Ministry of Labour, in collaboration with industries and educational institutions, should align workforce training with labor market needs and support job placement.

3. Government, private sector, and development partners should promote public-private partnerships to fund and scale workforce and literacy programs for sustainable poverty reduction.

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