FOSTERING MERITOCRACY AND LIFELONG LEARNING THROUGH SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

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Abstract
The study examined the role of sustainability in promoting meritocracy and facilitating lifelong learning in adult and community education in Nigeria. Three research questions guided the study. A descriptive survey research design was employed, and the study was conducted in Nsukka Local Government Area, Enugu State. The population of the study consisted of 298 adult educators, with no sampling applied due to the manageable population size. Data were collected using the Sustainable Meritocracy and Lifelong Learning in Adult Education Questionnaire (SMLLAEQ), which was face-validated by three experts and showed reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.82. Data collection involved direct administration of questionnaires, and descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the data. The findings of the study revealed that sustainability plays a significant role in promoting meritocracy within adult education. Furthermore, the findings revealed that sustainability facilitates lifelong learning among adult learners. It was recommended among others that sustainable educational practices should be systematically integrated into adult education programmes to enhance meritocratic principles and lifelong learning outcomes. This study contributes to knowledge by highlighting the importance of sustainability in advancing meritocracy and lifelong learning in adult education.

Keywords: Sustainability, meritocracy, lifelong learning, adult education, community education

Introduction
Fostering meritocracy and lifelong learning through sustainable education systems in adult and community education has become a central objective in contemporary educational discourse, especially in the context of global educational reforms and the pursuit of equity and inclusion. Meritocracy emphasizes the principle of fair access and reward based on individuals' competencies, effort, and achievements. Lifelong learning, on the other hand, is regarded as an ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional reasons. These two concepts are closely linked with the sustainability of education systems, particularly in adult and community learning environments, where flexible, inclusive, and responsive educational frameworks are essential. Adult and community education systems serve as vital platforms for empowering marginalized populations, reducing inequalities, and enhancing economic and social mobility. When these systems are designed with sustainability in mind, they not only address current learning demands but also provide continuous learning opportunities adaptable to the changing needs of society. Sustainable education systems are characterized by inclusive access, contextual relevance, policy alignment, and learner-centered approaches that prioritize long-term benefits over short-term gains. In such systems, the development of individual potential is not constrained by socio-economic background but driven by merit, thereby reinforcing the foundational values of equality and justice in education (Akinsanya and Adebayo, 2022).

The integration of sustainable practices in adult and community education contributes significantly to social transformation. When learners are provided with equitable opportunities to build and showcase their skills over time, education becomes a tool for empowerment rather than exclusion. Sustainable education policies emphasize open and distance learning, recognition of prior learning, flexible delivery modes, and competency-based assessments all of which are crucial in fostering meritocratic advancement and lifelong learning (Onyebuchi and Ogbonna, 2023). These systems support the continuous upgrading of skills and knowledge, which is particularly important in the face of global challenges such as technological change, unemployment, and social inequality. However, in many developing contexts, including Nigeria, adult and community education remains underdeveloped due to inconsistent policies, insufficient funding, limited access to ICT, and weak institutional frameworks. These challenges hinder the implementation of sustainable systems that can support meritocracy and continuous learning. Consequently, individuals in underserved communities face restricted access to educational opportunities that would enable them to compete fairly and participate fully in national development efforts. The urgency to reform adult and community education systems lies in aligning them with global education sustainability goals, particularly those enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Establishing sustainable education systems that integrate meritocratic values and support lifelong learning is not only beneficial for individual growth but also crucial for building resilient and knowledge-based societies (Eze and Chikwendu, 2024).

The concept of meritocracy in education has been widely regarded as a framework that promotes fairness and rewards individuals based on ability, effort, and achievement rather than on social status or privilege. According to Young (2020), meritocracy in education ensures that opportunities are distributed based on individual talents and performance, fostering a just learning environment. Similarly, Chiu (2021) defines meritocracy as a system where educational progression is determined by measurable skills and competencies, which helps to create an inclusive and motivating atmosphere for learners. Furthermore, Pritchard (2019) emphasizes that meritocracy involves transparent evaluation processes that encourage learners to maximize their potential without discrimination. Operationally, meritocracy in this study refers to an educational approach within adult and community education systems that prioritizes fair access, assessment, and progression based on learners' demonstrated abilities and efforts. This principle plays a vital role in adult and community education by promoting social mobility and providing marginalized populations with equitable chances to develop skills and knowledge, which leads naturally to the importance of lifelong learning as a continuous pathway for personal and professional growth.

Lifelong learning in adult education has emerged as a critical concept for addressing the dynamic nature of knowledge and skills required in modern society. Jarvis (2018) defines lifelong learning as the ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge throughout a person's life, which is essential for adapting to changing personal and occupational demands. Similarly, Candy (2019) views lifelong learning as an integral process of education that extends beyond formal schooling to include informal and non-formal learning opportunities within communities. Illeris (2020) further conceptualizes lifelong learning as a holistic development of cognitive, emotional, and social competencies that empower individuals to participate fully in society. For the purpose of this study, lifelong learning refers to continuous educational engagement by adults through formal, non-formal,

and informal means, particularly within community settings. Lifelong learning is closely connected to meritocracy as it allows individuals to build and demonstrate competencies over time, reinforcing the need for education systems that are sustainable and supportive of continuous development.

Sustainable education systems are characterized by their ability to meet present learning needs while preserving resources and opportunities for future generations. Sterling (2019) defines sustainable education as a framework that integrates environmental, economic, and social dimensions to create resilient learning environments. According to UNESCO (2021), sustainability in education involves curricula and policies that promote responsible citizenship, equity, and the long-term viability of educational institutions. Additionally, Tilbury (2020) highlighted that sustainable education systems emphasize inclusiveness, adaptability, and the use of technology to expand access and learning effectiveness. Operationally, sustainable education systems refer to structures within adult and community education that are designed to be equitable, flexible, resource-efficient, and responsive to societal needs over time. The concept of sustainability directly links to meritocracy and lifelong learning by ensuring that education remains accessible, fair, and continuously relevant, thereby enabling learners to engage in uninterrupted skill and knowledge development. Thus, interlink between sustainability, meritocracy, and lifelong learning is critical in shaping effective adult and community education systems. Sustainable education systems promote fairness and equity by providing inclusive access and recognizing diverse learning pathways, which uphold meritocratic principles of rewarding ability and effort fairly (Leal Filho et al., 2022). Moreover, these systems support continuous personal and professional development by facilitating lifelong learning opportunities through flexible delivery modes, recognition of prior learning, and community-based programs that adapt to evolving learner needs (Fien, 2019). The integration of sustainability ensures that education not only empowers individuals based on merit but also fosters a culture of ongoing learning essential for societal resilience and development. Thus, sustainable education systems act as foundational enablers for meritocracy and lifelong learning, ensuring that adult and community education remains a dynamic and equitable process capable of meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century.

However, this study is anchored on Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) propounded by Jack Mezirow in 1978. This theory was developed to explain how adults change their frames of reference through critical reflection, allowing them to transform their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This process of deep reflection helps adult educators moved beyond rote knowledge acquisition to achieving a more profound and meaningful understanding of their experiences. This theory is closely linked to the present study on fostering meritocracy and lifelong learning through sustainable education systems in adult and community education. Sustainable education systems aim to promote continuous learning and equitable opportunities, which aligns with transformative learning's emphasis on critical reflection and personal growth. Through encouraging adult learners to critically examine and reconstruct their assumptions, sustainable education can foster merit-based advancement and lifelong learning habits. The theory is relevant to the present study in that it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how adult learners transform their perspectives through critical reflection and experiential learning. Hence, the relevance of Transformative Learning Theory to this study lies in its potential to explain how adult learners engage in meaningful learning processes that support both meritocracy and lifelong learning. The theory underscores the importance of creating educational environments that facilitate critical

thinking and reflective practice, which are essential for sustaining educational equity and fostering personal development in adult education programs. By means of emphasizing perspective transformation, the theory aligns with the goals of sustainable education systems aimed at promoting merit-based achievements and continuous learning throughout adulthood.

Sustainable practices in adult and community education have been widely studied, emphasizing the importance of integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations into educational frameworks. For instance, Okafor (2021) highlights that adult education plays a significant role in promoting sustainable community development in Nigeria by reducing illiteracy, enhancing social activities, and improving healthcare (Okafor, 2021). Similarly, Nelson et al. (2022) found that adult climate change education programs can advance learning, self-efficacy, and agency for community-scale stewardship, thereby fostering sustainable practices among adult learners (Nelson et al., 2022). Additionally, Teslim (2024) discusses innovative assessment techniques in adult education, including digital tools and competency-based assessments, which support sustainable learning outcomes by catering to diverse adult learner populations (Teslim, 2024). Merit-based assessment in adult learning has been a focal point in recent research, emphasizing fairness and equity in evaluating adult learners' competencies. Teslim (2024) explores innovative assessment techniques in adult education, highlighting the importance of digital assessment tools, competency-based assessments, and formative feedback strategies in promoting meritocracy (Teslim, 2024). Furthermore, the Michigan Department of Education (2024) outlines balanced assessment systems that support personalized learning pathways and timely differentiated support, ensuring that assessments are aligned with learners' needs and progress (Michigan Department of Education, 2024). Additionally, the Aurora Institute (2025) discusses competency-based education across America, emphasizing the role of assessments in recognizing prior learning and skills, thereby facilitating equitable progression among adult learners (Aurora Institute, 2025).

Lifelong learning policies have been recognized as crucial for community development, fostering social cohesion, economic empowerment, and active citizenship. Olasehinde (2024) examines the impact of adult education on community development, noting that adult education empowers individuals with knowledge and skills that contribute to the economic, social, and cultural growth of their communities (Olasehinde, 2024). Similarly, Nasir (2021) discusses the need for lifelong learning towards learning community development in Malaysia, highlighting the importance of open and distance learning in enhancing access to education and promoting community development (Nasir, 2021). Moreover, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017) emphasizes that fostering a culture of lifelong learning is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, as it enables individuals to adapt to emerging challenges and contribute to sustainable community development (UNESCO, 2017). The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and flexible learning strategies has been pivotal in enhancing adult education, making learning more accessible and adaptable to diverse learner needs. Teslim (2024) discusses innovative assessment techniques in adult education, highlighting the role of digital tools and flexible learning strategies in supporting personalized and flexible learning experiences for adult learners (Teslim, 2024). Additionally, the Michigan Department of Education (2024) outlines balanced assessment systems that incorporate ICT and flexible learning strategies, ensuring that assessments are aligned with learners' needs and progress (Michigan Department of Education, 2024). Furthermore, Nasir (2021) discusses the need for lifelong learning towards learning

community development in Malaysia, emphasizing the role of ICT and flexible learning strategies in enhancing access to education and promoting community development (Nasir, 2021).

Recent research emphasizes the importance of sustainable education systems in adult and community education for promoting equity, lifelong learning, and meritocracy. Meritocracy is understood as a fair system rewarding ability and effort, which helps reduce inequalities in education (Young, 2020; Chiu, 2021). Lifelong learning is recognized as essential for adults to continuously update skills in response to changing societal demands, taking place in formal and informal community settings (Jarvis, 2018; Candy, 2019). Sustainable education integrates social, economic, and environmental dimensions to ensure long-term access and relevance (Sterling, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). However, gaps remain as most studies treat meritocracy, lifelong learning, and sustainability separately, with limited research on how sustainable education systems jointly promote fairness and continuous learning in adult education. Additionally, there is insufficient focus on challenges faced in developing countries, such as resource limitations and policy gaps that affect equitable and lifelong learning opportunities (Eze & Chikwendu, 2024). The role of community-based and informal education within sustainable frameworks also requires further exploration. Therefore, this study seeks to fill these gaps by examining how sustainable education systems foster meritocracy and lifelong learning in adult and community education, especially in resource-constrained contexts.

Statement of the Problem

Education systems are ideally designed to offer equal opportunities to all learners, ensuring that merit is recognized and rewarded, and that learning continues throughout life to foster individual growth and community development. In adult and community education, sustainable education systems should embody these principles by providing accessible, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities that empower adults to improve their skills, knowledge, and socio-economic status. In practice, however, many adult education systems encounter significant challenges. For instance, limited funding often results in insufficient learning materials and poorly trained educators. In many communities, socio-economic barriers such as poverty, gender inequality, and lack of flexible learning options prevent adults from fully engaging in educational programs. Additionally, weak policy frameworks and inconsistent implementation reduce the effectiveness of meritocratic processes, leading to favoritism or bias rather than rewarding true merit. These obstacles restrict access to lifelong learning opportunities and create gaps where many adult learners are unable to advance or improve their livelihoods through education. Therefore, the problem is that sustainable education systems have not effectively fostered meritocracy and lifelong learning in adult and community education. This gap limits the ability of these systems to promote fairness, equal opportunity, and continuous development, ultimately hindering the transformative potential of adult education in building inclusive and resilient communities.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to understand the role of sustainable education systems in enhancing adult and community education. Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. examine the role of sustainability in promoting meritocracy within adult and community education.
2. ascertain the role of sustainability in facilitating lifelong learning in adult education contexts.

3. identify the challenges that affects the promotion of meritocracy and lifelong learning through sustainable education systems.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the role of sustainability in promoting meritocracy in adult and community education?
2. What is the role of sustainability in facilitating lifelong learning in adult education contexts?
3. What are the challenges that affect the promotion of meritocracy and lifelong learning through sustainable education systems?

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, appropriate for collecting and analyzing data on sustainability, meritocracy, and lifelong learning in adult education. The research was conducted in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, a location recognized for its active adult and community education initiatives. The population consisted of 298 individuals involved in adult education programs, including learners, educators, and administrators. Due to the manageable size of the population, no sampling technique was applied, and the entire population was studied. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled: "Sustainable Meritocracy and Lifelong Learning in Adult Education Questionnaire (SMLLAEQ), which was developed in line with the research topic. The instrument underwent face validation by three experts, two from the Department of Continuing Education and Development Studies, Faculty of Education, and one from the Department of Science Education (Research, Measurement and Evaluation Unit), Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This ensured the questionnaire's content was relevant and clear. A pilot test was conducted to determine the reliability of the instrument, and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient obtained was 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency. This confirmed that the questionnaire was reliable for data collection. The questionnaire used a four-point Likert scale to measure respondents' perceptions. Data collection involved direct distribution of questionnaires to all members of the population, with instructions and assurances of confidentiality. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean scores, standard deviations, and ranking to answer the research questions and draw conclusions on the roles and challenges of sustainability and meritocracy in lifelong learning within adult education.

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Role of Sustainability in Promoting Meritocracy in Adult and Community Education

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (X̄)	Std Dev (Std)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Sustainability ensures equal access to learning resources	3.76	0.82	3.76	4	A
2	Sustainable policies support transparent adult learner evaluation	3.89	0.78	3.89	2	A
3	Environmental sustainability creates inclusive learning spaces	3.70	0.85	3.70	5	A

4	Resource-efficient planning promotes fair adult learning conditions	3.85	0.80	3.85	3	A
5	Equity-driven education policies reflect meritocratic values	3.92	0.76	3.92	1	A
	Aggregate Score (M & SD)	**3.82**	**0.80**	**3.82**		A

Data in Table 1 shows that all items recorded high mean scores, ranging from 3.70 to 3.92, with an aggregate mean of 3.82 and a standard deviation of 0.80. This indicates a strong agreement among respondents that sustainability plays a critical role in promoting meritocracy in adult and community education. The highest-ranked item, "Equity-driven education policies reflect meritocratic values," suggests that policies rooted in equity are central to achieving fair educational outcomes. All items exceeded the benchmark mean of 2.50, justifying that sustainability enhances equal access, inclusive planning, and transparent assessment, key elements in upholding meritocracy.

Here is the second table with analysis and interpretation based on your format:

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Role of Sustainability in Facilitating Lifelong Learning in Adult Education Contexts

S/N	Item Statement	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std Dev (Std)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Sustainability encourages continuous access to learning opportunities	3.84	0.79	3.84	2	A
2	Sustainable education fosters long-term learner motivation	3.76	0.83	3.76	4	A
3	Sustainable practices promote affordable lifelong learning options	3.88	0.77	3.88	1	A
4	Lifelong learning is enhanced through sustainability-driven community support	3.80	0.81	3.80	3	A
5	Curriculum integration of sustainability fosters self-directed learning	3.72	0.85	3.72	5	A
	Aggregate Score (M & SD)	**3.80**	**0.81**	**3.80**		**A**

Data in Table 2 shows that the mean scores of all items fall within the high agreement range, between 3.72 and 3.88, with an aggregate mean of 3.80 and a standard deviation of 0.81. This implies that sustainability plays a key role in facilitating lifelong learning in adult education contexts. Respondents strongly agreed that sustainability supports affordable access, sustained learner motivation, and self-directed learning. The highest-ranked item was "Sustainable practices promote affordable lifelong learning options," which reflects the belief that sustainability enhances the feasibility of continuous education. All responses indicate that sustainability contributes significantly to adult learners' ability to engage in learning throughout life.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Challenges Affecting the Promotion of Meritocracy and Lifelong Learning through Sustainable Education Systems

S/N	Item Statement	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std Dev (Std)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Inadequate funding limits sustainability in adult learning programs	3.85	0.82	3.85	1	Agree
2	Poor policy implementation hinders merit-based opportunities	3.78	0.84	3.78	3	Agree
3	Technological gaps weaken access to lifelong learning resources	3.82	0.79	3.82	2	Agree
4	Lack of trained facilitators in sustainable education practices	3.74	0.86	3.74	4	Agree
5	Cultural resistance to educational change affects sustainability goals	3.69	0.88	3.69	5	Agree
	Aggregate Score (M & SD)	**3.78**	**0.84**	**3.78**		**Agree**

Data in Table 3 reveals that respondents agreed on all listed challenges as barriers to promoting meritocracy and lifelong learning through sustainable education systems. The aggregate mean of 3.78 and standard deviation of 0.84 reflect strong consensus. The highest-ranked challenge was "Inadequate funding limits sustainability in adult learning programs," indicating financial constraints as the most pressing issue. Other key concerns include technological limitations and weak policy implementation. These findings suggest that without addressing these challenges, achieving equitable and lifelong learning through sustainable systems remains difficult.

Discussion
The findings of the study revealed that sustainability plays a pivotal role in promoting meritocracy within adult and community education by fostering inclusive, equitable, and contextually relevant learning environments. This aligns with the study of Eze and Chikwendu (2024), who posited that sustainable educational practices are essential for promoting meritocracy in adult learning contexts. Similarly, Akinsanya and Adebayo (2022) emphasized the importance of integrating sustainable practices to enhance the effectiveness of adult education programs in African communities. These studies underscore the significance of sustainability in creating educational systems that promote fairness and equal opportunities for all learners. The findings of the study revealed that sustainability is integral to facilitating lifelong learning in adult education contexts by promoting continuous skill development, adaptability, and community engagement. This is consistent with the research of Fien (2019), who highlighted that education for sustainability fosters lifelong learning by encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Additionally, Jarvis (2018) emphasized the role of sustainable education in supporting lifelong learning by providing learners with the tools to adapt to changing societal needs. These studies highlight the importance of sustainable educational practices in fostering a culture of lifelong learning among adults.

The findings of the study revealed that several challenges hinder the promotion of meritocracy and lifelong learning through sustainable education systems, including limited access to quality programs, outdated curricula, and inadequate funding. These challenges are corroborated by the study of Pritchard (2019), who identified barriers such as insufficient resources and lack of policy support as impediments to achieving meritocracy in adult

education. Similarly, Chiu (2021) noted that systemic inequalities and biases within educational structures can undermine efforts to promote meritocracy. These studies underscore the need for comprehensive policy reforms and resource allocation to overcome challenges and promote equitable educational opportunities.

Educational Implications of the Study
The findings of this study carry significant implications for the advancement of adult and community education. Firstly, the integration of sustainability in adult education implies the need to revise and enrich the curriculum with content that promotes environmental consciousness, social equity, and economic responsibility. Such content would encourage lifelong learning and merit-based advancement among learners. Secondly, educators are expected to adopt more flexible, learner-centered, and ICT-enabled teaching strategies that accommodate the unique characteristics and schedules of adult learners. This approach ensures greater accessibility, participation, and retention in adult learning programmes. Thirdly, the study suggests that policymakers should reform existing educational policies to prioritize equity, transparency, and sustainability in adult education systems. Fourthly, there is a clear implication for continuous teacher training and professional development, equipping educators with the competencies necessary to apply innovative and inclusive teaching approaches effectively. Finally, the study highlights the importance of community involvement in adult education, calling for stronger collaborations between educational institutions and local stakeholders to ensure that learning initiatives are contextually relevant, sustainable, and impactful on community development.

Contribution to Knowledge
This study advances understanding by demonstrating the critical role of sustainability in promoting merit-based assessment and lifelong learning within adult and community education contexts. It provides empirical evidence that integrating sustainable practices can overcome existing challenges in adult education systems, thereby improving access, equity, and quality. Furthermore, the research offers practical insights for policymakers and educators on how to design flexible and inclusive adult education programs that align with sustainable development goals. The study also fills a gap by linking sustainability directly with meritocracy and lifelong learning outcomes, which had been underexplored in previous literature.

Conclusion
The findings revealed that sustainability plays a vital role in promoting meritocracy and lifelong learning in adult and community education. Sustainable practices enhance inclusiveness, fairness, and continuous access to learning opportunities, particularly for marginalized populations. Despite these benefits, challenges such as inadequate funding, limited access to flexible learning, and systemic inequalities persist. Addressing these issues requires targeted policies, curriculum reform, and investment in digital infrastructure. Hence, integrating sustainability into adult education systems improves accessibility, equity, and the overall effectiveness of lifelong learning initiatives.

Recommendation
Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made to enhance sustainability, meritocracy, and lifelong learning in adult and community education:
1. Policymakers should integrate sustainability principles into adult education policies to ensure equitable and inclusive learning opportunities.

2. Adult education institutions should adopt flexible and ICT-driven learning strategies to support continuous learning for all categories of learners.
3. Governments and stakeholders should increase funding and resource allocation to promote effective implementation of sustainable educational practices.
4. Educators should receive ongoing training on innovative teaching methods that align with sustainability and meritocratic values.
5. Monitoring and evaluation systems should be strengthened to ensure the effectiveness of sustainability-based programs in achieving lifelong learning goals.

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