

## **TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: THE KEY FOR SELF-SUSTENANCE IN NIGERIAN HARSH ECONOMY**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the transformative learning and its potentials as a critical tool for equipping individuals to navigate and thrive in an unpredictable socio-economic landscape, tagged as “harsh economy”. Transformative learning fosters the ability to question assumptions, embrace new perspectives, and develop problem-solving skills essential for self-sustenance. This pedagogical paradigm however, has not been fully integrated in Nigerian education system leading to production of ill equipped individuals with little or no survival skills in the present dynamic society. Transformative learning reshapes cognitive and emotional frameworks, enabling individuals to achieve personal growth and resilience. It emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, rational discourse, and experiential engagements in advancing self-awareness and adaptability. The concept of self-sustenance is examined in this article as the ability to meet personal needs independently, while maintaining long-term resilience. This mindset is particularly crucial in Nigeria's current economic climate, where inflation, food insecurity, unemployment, and poverty have reached alarming levels. The article identifies transformative learning as a pathway to empower individuals with the epistemic and soft competencies needed to mitigate these challenges. It argues that by applying critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability through transformative education, individuals can better navigate the complexities of a distressed economy. Ultimately, this work underscores the role of transformative learning in fostering self-sustenance amidst Nigeria's economic challenges. It recommends among others that transformative learning should be fully integrated into Nigerian curriculum in order to empower individuals to achieve self-dependence and resilience in an era marked by socio-economic uncertainties.

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**Keywords:** Transformative learning, harsh economy and self-sustenance

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### **Introduction**

In a rapidly evolving global economy, marked by technological and environmental disruptions including socio-economic uncertainties, individuals are confronted with unique challenges in achieving self-sustenance globally. In Nigeria, this phenomenon is nonetheless at play and this has led to what can be described as a “harsh economy”, characterized by massive unemployment, poverty, hunger, hyper-inflation, high cost of living, erratic exchanged rate and general unpredictable economic activities. These unpalatable socio-economic realities have necessitated the emergence of innovative solutions for individuals and communities to thrive. At the heart of these solutions lies the concept of transformative learning, a powerful pedagogical approach that fosters critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, and the ability to reframe perspectives (Sterling, 2011).

Transformative learning is an epistemic activity that fundamentally reshapes how individuals interpret their experiences and engage with the world. This process enables individuals to question the status quo, embrace new dimensions of thinking, and adapt to changing realities. In the context of Nigeria's harsh economy where traditional economic

models are becoming grossly inadequate, Wolff, Shephard, Belluigi, Vega-Marcote, Rieckmann, Skarstein, and Cheah (2022) asserted that transformative learning holds the potential to empower individuals with the critical skills needed for self-sustenance by stimulating creativity, adaptability, collaborative, resilience, and general problem-solving abilities thereby, equipping individuals to navigate socio-economic complexities and seize opportunities within an unpredictable economic landscape. However, Anyanwu and Iwuamadi (2015) observed that educational practice in Nigeria has remained untransformed with traditional curriculum dominating the pedagogical landscape thereby impeding the quest for global integration among graduates. This suggests that there is a pedagogical lacuna in Nigerian education system which transformative learning is needed to bridge. This piece therefore explores the pivotal role of transformative learning in equipping learners with transformative competencies to be able to confront the challenges posed by Nigeria's harsh economy and demonstrates how it can foster self-sustenance among Nigerian students and general populace.

### **Conceptualization**

#### **Transformative Learning (TL)**

Transformative learning is a concept that involves a profound shift in an individual's perspectives, beliefs, and parameters of understanding and interpreting the world. According to Sherman (2021), transformative learning is a fundamental reevaluation and restructuring of one's cognitive and emotional frameworks. The root of transformative learning is generally traced back to Paulo Freire, a 21<sup>st</sup> century Brazilian educator and philosopher who in his critical pedagogy, outlined in his seminar work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" published in 1968. In this work, Freire called for a new relationship between the teacher and the learner where both could engage actively in a manner that creates space for learning on both sides. The author criticized the dominant teacher-centred pedagogical style of the time, notably referring to it as 'banking system of education' where teachers make deposits into the brains (containers) of the students, who are then expected to passively receive, memorize, and store this without any change occurring to the container itself (Freire, 1970).

While Freire's work contained the seeds, it was Jack Mezirow who developed a more comprehensive theory of transformative learning. Mezirow introduced this concept in the late 20th century. The author's seminar work, "Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning", provides a foundation for understanding transformative learning. Mezirow defines transformative learning as "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning, perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2003, p.58-59). This signifies personal and social transformation, empowering individuals to take actions and engage in complex issues of human development. The fundamental goal of transformative learning is to empower individuals to change their beliefs and assumptions of the world. This capacity to change is essential because it allows one to remain flexible in the face of global uncertainties. Brown & Brown (2015) affirmed that this flexibility is highly relevant in today's society where the speed at which technological changes and existential realities are becoming astonishing. This implies that TL has the capacity to assist individuals overcome and survive in an unpredictable circumstance. Transformative learning is also characterized by innovative qualities of understanding and improving local or global phenomena using problem

solving skills. It has two basic forms of learning; instrumental learning and communicative learning. Instrumental learning focuses on task-oriented problem solving, and evaluation of cause and effect relationships, while communicative learning focuses on how people communicate their feelings, needs, and desires.

Transformative learning fosters a broad range of competencies namely, critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, centrality of experience, self-awareness, feedback among others which are crucial in achieving positive perspective change (Mezirow, 2003). This work however, focuses on critical thinking, adaptability, and collaborative skills as substrata for realizing self-sustenance in Nigerian harsh economy. The rationale for restricting the conversation to these three competencies is predicated on the fact that critical thinking, adaptability, and collaborative skills are pivotal elements of transformative process. For instance, critical thinking is considered as the heart of transformative learning as it involves examining and questioning one's beliefs, assumptions, and values. This process allows individuals to identify biases, reframe perspectives, and develop a more dynamic understanding of the world. Adaptability and collaborative skills on the other hand aid to prepare individuals to adapt to rapidly changing environments by fostering flexibility, teamwork, and open-mindedness.

Interestingly, Mezirow (2003) outlines ten stages of transformational learning process by which individuals through to attain complete change of perspective and integration (i) Experiencing a disorientating dilemma (ii) Conducting a self-examination (iii) Critically assessing present assumptions (iv) Recognizing shared experiences, exploring options for new roles (v) relationships and actions (vi) planning a course of action (vii) Acquiring knowledge (viii) Trying out a new role, relationship or behaviour (ix) Building competence and confidence in the new role, relationship or behaviour and (x) Reintegration. The above stages highlight the progressive nature of transformative learning, emphasizing the importance of critical reflection, self-examination, and openness to change in facilitating profound shifts in individuals' perspectives and behaviour. Through these phases, individuals can achieve personal growth, enhance self-awareness, and a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. It is crucial to note that transformative learning seeks to understand, contextualize and promote human development through learning. It provides a comprehensive description of how individuals construe, reconstruct, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experiences. It is constructed on the premise that for individuals to change their beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions, they must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, and such a one must have been completely rewired, positively rejigged and transformed in order to be self-motivated, self-governing, rational, and collaborative-leading to self-sustenance in a fleeting and dynamic environment.

### **Self-Sustenance**

The concept of self-sustenance refers to the ability of an individual, system, or entity to maintain itself in a healthy condition without necessarily needing external support or assistance. This concept is closely related to self-sufficiency or self-reliance which involves being able to fulfill one's needs independently. Hamstead and Quinn (2005) point out that self-sustenance emphasizes the capacity to sustain oneself economically, socially, or otherwise, without relying on others. In broader contexts, self-sustenance can be applied to systems like ecosystems or economies. For instance, a self-sustaining ecosystem is one that can produce all the resources needed to cater for itself indefinitely without external inputs. Similarly, a self-sustaining economy, or autarky, requires little or no trade with the

outside world. According to Chander and Krishnan (2021), the philosophy of self-sustenance has been around for centuries and is considered crucial for achieving a happy and fulfilling life at individual, cooperate, or national levels. Economically, it involves practices such as autonomous living, creativity, and sustainable Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to maintain independence and reduce reliance on resources coming from external entities. In a strict sense, self-sustenance goes beyond self-sufficiency; it focuses on the ability to maintain independence over time (Devereux, Sabates-Wheeler & Longhurst, 2021). This entails that self-sustenance involves creating systems or practices that ensure long-term sustainability and resilience without external inputs. At individual levels, self-sustenance deals with the capacity to depend on oneself for emotional, financial, and practical needs. This perspective is deeply rooted in the values of individualistic cultures, which prioritizes personal freedom, autonomy, and self-actualization. Self-sustenance encourages individuals to pursue personal achievement, define their identities and meet their needs independently while promoting a sense of fulfillment and control over their lives.

Furthermore, self-sustenance has implications for self-worth, self-expression, self-knowledge, resilience, and self-acceptance. It boosts confidence level and motivation for envisioning and attaining set targets by individuals or groups even in a hostile economic environment which can potentially lead to a healthy self-identity. Moore (2019) notes that self-sustenance is not about one doing everything by himself. It is not about being financially independent, either. And it is certainly not about shouldering every hardship one faces all on one's lonesome. According to the author, it is about a mindset and readiness to survive where little or no external support is readily available. This readiness encompasses mental, epistemological, and psychomotor dexterity. In addition, Devereux et al (2021) point out that one merit of self-sustenance is that it offers a sense of independence and freedom from external dependencies. To this end, individuals who are self-sustaining are less vulnerable to economic fluctuations, environmental changes, socio-political, and other external factors that can disrupt societal existential structure. If individuals are therefore, trained using transformative enablers, they are likely to confront and survive freely in an unpredictable circumstances including surviving in a harsh economy.

### **Harsh Economy**

The term "harsh economy" is an economic construct that describes the state of an economy that is in distress whether at a corporate, national, or global levels. Such an economy loses capacity to generate sufficient income to meet financial obligations, leading to systemic instability and underperformance. The economic condition of this nature is marked by both structural weaknesses and cyclical vulnerabilities, often resulting in prolonged stagnation, declining productivity, and social hardship (Chen, 2024). By implication, this economic phenomenon can potentially trigger unsustainable debt, cash flow crises, and structural inefficiencies. Acharya (2013) argues that domestically, harsh economy in any given society erodes business viability and labour markets; globally, it exacerbates inequality and geopolitical tensions. In the context of Nigeria, the nation's economy has been in limbo for decades but the recent economic reform policies of the present administration have further exacerbated the already fragile economic atmosphere leading to untold economic complications which is interpreted statistically to be in a harsh situation. These economic reforms include the removal of fuel subsidies, unification of official and parallel exchange rates, and multiple taxations among others. While these

measures were purportedly aimed at strengthening public finances and stabilizing the naira, these “ill-timed decisions” have caused more harm than the good it intended to deliver, and the consequence is the present economic quagmire bedeviling the nation. There are several economic indicators to point to the fact that Nigerian economy is in harsh condition, including but not limited to high inflation, poverty, unemployment, high exchange rate, and low productivity. The above description aligns with the broader concept of an economic collapse, a severe contraction marked by systemic breakdowns in market mechanisms.

The removal of fuel subsidies and currency devaluation has significantly increased the cost of living in Nigeria, eroding purchasing power. As of December 2024, Nigeria's inflation rate surged to 34.8% up from 32.7% in September (NBS, 2025). The rising cost of living and high food inflation have exacerbated hunger, leading to tragic incidents such as stampedes at charity events, where at least 32 people were reportedly trampled to death in December 2024 (*The Nation*, 2024). This harsh economic situation has thrown more Nigerians into multidimensional poverty. It has been estimated that over 129 million (56%) Nigerians live below poverty line, and economic instability has worsened this situation (World Bank, 2024). So, despite being Africa's largest economy, Nigeria has a significant portion of its population living in poverty and this situation has been aggravated by economic challenges, including inflation and unemployment. A significant portion of the workforce is engaged in low-paying or part-time jobs that do not fully utilize their skills, indicating underemployment issues in the Nigerian labour market. Generally, Nigeria's economic situation is characterized by high inflation, unemployment, poverty, and low productivity, exacerbated by structural challenges and policy implementation issues. This harsh economic situation calls for innovative strategies (including transformative approach) that would empower individuals with nonconventional competencies to foster self-sustenance and survival in the current economic uncertainties.

### **Fostering Self-Sustenance through Transformative Learning in a Harsh Economy**

As a way of recapitulation, transformative learning is a process of deep, constructive, and meaningful change in the way individuals perceive themselves and the world around them. This learning approach promotes critical thinking, adaptability, and collaborative skills which is capable of empowering individuals to become self-sustaining, especially in an unpredictable circumstance or economically challenging times. These three key elements of transformative learning (critical thinking, adaptability, and collaborative skills) represent in this piece as basic substrata upon which self-sustenance in a harsh economy can be realizable.

### **Critical Thinking Skills**

Critical thinking skill is the ability to analyse, evaluate, and solve problems systematically. It plays a vital role in ensuring survival and success in unpredictable circumstances. This skill enables individuals to make informed decisions, identify opportunities, and develop innovative solutions to economic challenges. A harsh economy often means dwindling incomes and escalating costs of living. A critical thinker who has experienced transformation can manage his/her finances wisely by prioritizing essential expenses, cutting unnecessary spending, and exploring creative ways to save money which will enhance the chances for self-sustenance. For instance, a family struggling with high grocery prices may analyze spending patterns and identify alternative solutions. The

individual could shift from purchasing branded products to locally produced goods or growing their own vegetables at home, thereby reducing food expenses and advancing self-sustenance. According to Selviani, Firdaus, and Sumarno (2022), critical thinking skill helps individuals to assess market gaps and develop innovative business ideas to meet consumer demands. This implies that a critical thinker can easily reflect and adapt to economic shifts by leveraging available resources and changing strategies when necessary. Economic difficulties make financial decisions riskier. Critical thinking competencies aid individuals to assess the pros and cons of different investment opportunities before committing resources to it. Joseph (2023) affirm that individuals who are armed with critical thinking skills are advantageously positioned with sensibility to usually conduct thorough research to identify potential threats and make informed choices to maximize returns. Therefore, in a difficult economy, self-sustenance requires more than just luck, it demands critical thinking. The ability to analyze situations, create opportunities, adapt to changes, and make informed decisions ensures independent survival and success.

### **Adaptability Skills**

Adaptability is a critical skill in today's uncertain economic landscape. It refers to the ability to adjust to changing conditions, learn new skills, and embrace new ways of thinking. In a challenging economy, adaptability enables individuals to remain self-sustaining by adjusting and embracing new realities to be able to cope with socio-economic uncertainties with resilience. One of the most effective ways to remain self-sustaining is to continuously learn new skills that are in demand (Ferster, 2024). This means that adaptable individuals recognize shifts in the job market and equip themselves accordingly. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many professionals in hospitality and tourism lost their jobs. Those who adapted by learning digital marketing, coding, or e-commerce found alternative employment in online businesses, remote work, and freelancing. In other words, continuous learning keeps individuals relevant and employable in changing industries, therefore, fostering their self-sustainability in a dwindling economy.

Furthermore, in a tough economy, industries often undergo rapid transformations due to technological advancements, shifting consumer preferences, or market disruptions. Adaptability allows individuals to embrace these changes rather than resist them. In this regard, McKeown (2012) asserts that adaptable individuals excel at problem-solving and resilience, which are critical during economic downturns. The author further alludes that such individuals view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than insurmountable obstacles. This shows that an employee whose company undergoes restructuring as a resultant effect of economic recession may proactively learn new skills or take on different roles within the organization. This flexibility not only secures their position but also enhances their employability level and self-sustainability. In a difficult economy, adaptability is a survival skill. Whether by learning new skills, embracing flexible work models, starting a business, or leveraging technology, individuals who adapt can remain self-sustaining. The key is to stay proactive, resourceful, and open to change. This indicates that adaptability skills empower individuals to thrive in difficult economies by embracing changes, solving problems creatively, learning continuously, networking effectively, managing stress, and preparing for contingencies. These skills not only foster self-sustenance but also position individuals to seize opportunities amid adversity.

### **Collaborative Skills**

Collaborative skill refers to the specific abilities that allow a group of people to function cohesively and productively. Collaborative competency is crucial for achieving common objectives, enhancing group cohesion, and improving overall performance (Riaz & Din, 2023). Strong collaborative skill can lead to better problem-solving, increased innovation, and a more inclusive work environment, ultimately contributing to higher productivity and team success. In challenging economic times, survival and progress often depend on individuals' ability to work together. Shaikh (2012) observe that collaborative skills-such as teamwork, communication, networking, and problem-solving, play a crucial role in ensuring self-sustenance by enabling people to share resources, reduce costs, create opportunities, and enhance innovation. This shows that collaborative skills are essential for navigating challenging economic conditions, as they enable individuals and groups to pool resources, share knowledge, and create innovative solutions. In a difficult economy (like the one Nigeria is currently facing), individuals and organizations often face resource constraints. Collaboration allows people to share tools, spaces, and expertise to reduce costs and maximize efficiency. Residents in economically strained areas can collaborate to grow food collectively, ensuring food security while minimizing individual expenses. Collaborative problem-solving brings together diverse perspectives to address challenges creatively, such as ideas, teams, and innovative solutions that might not emerge in isolation. In a group where members teach each other valuable skills (e.g., coding, carpentry), it can help participants gain new income streams. In some communities, individuals collaborate by pooling money into a fund that members can borrow from during emergencies. Generally, collaborative skills enable people to share burdens, create opportunities, and develop innovative solutions that ensure independent survival. Whether through partnerships, networking, skill exchange, or community support, working together is a powerful tool for economic survival and self-sustenance.

The learning environment is a great opportunity for every nation to entrench the above essential skills on the future generation, that done, the school levers armed with these skills becomes drivers of the nation's economy. This, they will be able to do through innovative skills that will help them to be self-sufficient, many through the innovative and critical skills acquired through TL will become entrepreneurial, and thus become job creators rather than job seekers. When that is the case, the nation, no doubt, will enjoy the dividends of transformational learning (TL). With the high level of unemployment coupled with the harsh economic situation prevalent in Nigeria today, our educational system needs urgent revamp especially to make it able to inculcate the skills of TL to the students and through that salvage Nigeria from the current economic impasse.

## **Conclusion**

The paper explored transformative learning as a critical tool for addressing the challenges posed by Nigeria's harsh economy. This pedagogical approach equips individuals with the skills (such as critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, and resilience) needed to navigate socio-economic complexities and achieve self-sustenance. The paper emphasizes the need for inclusion of this pedagogical model into Nigerian education curriculum because literature has shown that traditional curriculum still appears to be dominating pedagogical engagements in the nation's learning institutions. Therefore, government and other stake holders in the education sector should ensure the integration and implementation of transformative learning into the learning modules of the students to bridge the pedagogical gap. This integration would empower Nigerian students to reframe their perspectives, embrace innovative solutions, and build sustainable livelihoods despite

the prevailing economic adversities in the nation and around the globe. As the nation continues to grapple with inflation, poverty, unemployment, and other systemic challenges, the inclusion of transformative learning paradigm into the nation's education sector would represent a pathway not only for personal growth and sustenance but also for collective progress toward a more resilient and self-sustaining society.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are hereby articulated.

1. Government should review learning curriculum to ensure full integration and implementation of transformative education at all levels of learning in Nigeria to guarantee early exposure to transformative competencies for sustainable living
2. Institutions or faculties should invest in professional development of teachers or faculty members to equip them with pedagogical techniques that are amenable to critical thinking, adaptability, and collaborative skills to help educators learn how to create engaging classroom environments where students feel comfortable to question and debate on critical ideas. This approach can provide students with practical opportunities to apply transformative skills outside of traditional classroom settings
3. Government should review the economic policies and implement them in phases to allow gradual adjustments. This approach would aid citizens to prepare both mentally and socially to embrace new economic policies with less stress.

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