

## **Social Institution: A Review of Its Concepts and Functions** **BY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Social institution is a complex, integrated set of social norms organized to meet certain basic needs of the society. Social institutions help to simplify social behaviour and provide ready-made forms of social relations and social roles for the individual. They also act as agencies of coordination and stability for the total culture. It may differ in its establishment from one society to another, but in any case there are basically five types of social institutions namely: family, educational, economic, political and religious institutions. This paper described the concepts and functions of each of these institutions as they are important for the preservation of our societal values.*

**Key words:** Social institution, concepts, functions, society.

### **Concept of Social Institution**

An institution is any structure or mechanism of social order and cooperation governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given community. Institutions are identified with a social purpose and permanence, transcending individual lives and intention by enforcing rules that govern cooperative behaviour. A society requires certain basic social needs for survival and satisfaction of its members. In each society, therefore, people create social institutions to meet these needs. Schaefer and Lamm (1997) defined social institutions as organized patterns of beliefs and behaviour centred on basic social needs. They re-affirmed that institutions are organized in response to particular needs such as replacing personnel (family), and preserving order (the government).

A social institution is a complex, integrated set of social norms organized around the preservation of a basic societal value. They support the society's survival.

Nnatu (2007) defined social institution as a recognized normative pattern, a system of required, concerted, co-operative and reciprocal relationships and practices whereby people concerned tend to satisfy their individual and social needs. According to Ekong (2010) social institutions are organized systems of social relationships embodying certain common values and procedures, and meeting certain basic societal needs. It entails culturally approved patterns of behaviour with defined statuses, roles and procedures.

In the broadest sense, an institution is something that works according to rules established or at least acknowledged by law or by custom. And whose regular and continuous operation cannot be understood without taking those rules into account. Institutions impose constraints on individuals. They also provide him/her with opportunities. There are different forms of understanding of social institutions; a functionalist view understands social institutions as a complex set of social norms, beliefs, values and role relationship that arise in response to the needs of society. Social institutions exist to satisfy social needs. On the other hand, a conflict view holds that all individuals are not placed equally in society. All social institutions whether familial, religious, political, economic, legal or educational will operate in the interest of the dominant sections of society be it class, caste, tribe or gender. The dominant social section not only dominates political and economic institutions but also ensures that the ruling class ideas become the ruling ideas of a society. This is very different from the idea that there are general needs of a society.

While societies may differ in how they establish these institutions and in how simple or complex they are, we find the same five basic social institutions among all human groups. The five basic institutions are family, educational, economic, political and religious institutions (Nnatu, 2007; Nonyelu, 2009; Ekong, 2010). Although all sociologists agree on the big five, many consider other segments of society to be social institutions as well – aging, the media, health care, social welfare, work, gender and others.

## **Functions of Social Institutions**

Functions perform by social institutions include:

1. Economic function: economic institutions fulfill the basic needs of the society. These needs are provided under the system of production, distribution of wealth, expenditures and services.
2. Political functions: the main function of political institution is to deepen the human character in organized forms, and also to maintain social organization.
3. Familial function: the main responsibility of the institution is to increase the human race, by bringing up new generation, and this is done through family and marriage.
4. Religious function: the principal aim of the religious function is to satisfy the religious/spiritual needs of the society. It upholds mutual relationship between human beings and God. It also provides sustainability and durability to society.
5. Social function: the basic objective of social institution is to maintain social control in the society. It also provides formation to its members through exemplary characters.
6. Social transformation: social institutions protect social inheritance by transforming it from one generation to the next. For example, in our daily lives, we act and behave whatever we are taught during the process of socialization.
7. Socialization: social institutions play vital roles in the socialization of the individuals, therefore the members of each society possess particular characteristics which separate them from other societies.

## **The Family**

The family is usually defined as a kinship group linked by blood and marriage and occupying a common household. The family as a social group is made up of a man, his wife or wives and children living under a common roof, interacting and influencing the behaviours of each other in a more intimate manner than with others who do not belong to it. As a social institution the family entails the formalised, regular and patterned way or process by which family life is carried out. A family could also be regarded as a bio-social group united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption and primarily responsible for procreation, socialization of the new born and

for other human needs. The family unit is vital to the daily lives of most individuals in society. It contributes significantly to the maintenance of society and transmission of any society's culture to its new generation.

### **Types of Family**

There are two major types of the family. The **nuclear family**, also called conjugal family consists of an adult couple and their unmarried children living together. The other type is the **extended family** in which relatives in addition to parents and their children live together or close to one another. An extended family consists of several nuclear families united by social ties of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, children, wives, husbands, parents and grandparents etc. The structure of the extended family enables it to fulfil basic functions of the family better than her nuclear counterparts. For instance, the presence of more adults facilitates effective child care and socialization (Egbue, 2002). Also, crises situations like death, divorce and illness involve less strain for family members since there are more people who can provide assistance and emotional support (Scheafer and Lamm, 1997). Presence of large number of family members in the extended family arrangement might as in traditional agricultural societies boost prosperity. This is because as it means more hands to work the farms and more sources of economic support to members in difficult situation. Nonetheless, frequent intra-family conflicts are often experienced in extended than nuclear families and this could also be counterproductive.

Despite differences in family type, sociologists acknowledge the universality of the family unit in one form or the other in all human society. They also recognize the declining prominence of the family in modern times with gross erosion of its cherished functions and stability.

### **Functions of the Family**

The family performs many societal functions to ensure the welfare and progress of its members.

The functions include:

- Reproduction of the human species. That is grant life.
- Care and rearing of the young offspring particularly at infancy and years of dependence.
- Education of the children.

- Protection from enemies, danger and psychological isolation, provision of love and affection to reduce tension and frustration.
- Care of the aged and disabled family members.
- Production and consumption of good and services.
- Moral and financial support to family members in time of joy and trouble.
- Social, psychological and material support in time of bereavement, disaster or other forms or adversities.
- Provide socialisation. That is, the family equips the individual with the knowledge which he/she will need in order to play his/her roles in the society.

**Family Institution: family farming unit (*Gandu*)**

*Gandu* is a Hausa word which refers to family farming units. According to Buntjer (1973), it is a family farming unit whereby members of a kinship group combine their farming operations under a common leadership and organization, to form the basis for a common unit of domestic economy. Similarly, Diarra and Monimart (2006) defined *gandu* as a collective farm unit that are controlled by the *gandu* head who organizes the agricultural work. *Gandu* as a household organization comprises the head of the family and his son coming together to work on the family farm (*gonar gandu*) and the head of the family is also the head of the family farm (*Baban gandu*).

Washington (2014) defined a family farm as a farm owned by a family, whose operation is passed down to future generations. The family farm is typically viewed as its own culture and is beneficial to the preservation of the land. Both in developing and developed countries, family farming is the predominant form of agriculture in the food production sector.

The family farm is the dominant form of production organization in Nigeria agriculture. The male head of the farm family is usually the proprietor. He provides all the capital, land, and management. Most of the labour required on the farm is provided by the farm family. Farm size is small and access to land is limited by indigenous tenure systems. The seasonality of production constrains the generation of a continuous flow of income for the farm family.

Generally, the farm family considers agricultural production as a 'way of living'. As a result most family farms are not organized as business enterprises (Oguzor, 2011).

### **Social Institution: Education**

A society's future largely depends on the successful socialization of new members. Every society develops a system of education consisting of the roles and norms that ensure the transmission of knowledge, values and patterns of behaviour from one generation to the next. In some preindustrial societies, education is largely informal and occurs mainly within the family. Schooling is formal education, which involves instruction by specially trained teachers who follow officially recognized policies.

Education is the process of transmitting the socially approved cultural heritage of any society from one generation to another. It is also the process by which the new knowledge is spread among members of a society. The cultural heritage and knowledge are transferred through education. Education as an activity is the process of transmitting and acquiring the socially approved aspects of cultural heritage. The school is the social organisation in which education takes place. Education is also viewed as a social institution because it comprises that segment of the basic social structure which meets the educational needs of society (Igbo, 2003). This suggests that educational institution contains within it a set of values, norms, sanctions, procedures and beliefs which guide the functioning of the educational sector in society.

The purpose of education is to transmit the knowledge, skills, behaviour patterns and values necessary for people to become functioning members of society.

### **Functions of Education**

The functions of educational institutions include the following:

1. The transmission of the culture from one generation to another. This is the normal socialisation function which involves the teaching of societal values, norms, taboos, rites,

folk ways among others to the new entrant into the society (Ekong, 2010). This function can be executed within the family, by peer groups and other primary groups in a community.

2. Bringing about social change via the modification of cultural heritage and development of new knowledge skills, arts and artifacts. New knowledge is acquired through research and present experience has shown that technologically advanced nations invest more on research than developing nations.
3. Training of people for specialised adult roles. This involves learning of new skills through apprenticeship, acquisition of knowledge, tutorship or indoctrination, or by formal educational institutions. This level of education is mostly obtained outside the family and informal school settings with some expert teachers (Ekong, 2010).
4. Provision of a setting for school interaction. The school brings people from diverse background into constant interaction. This thereby fosters the formation of peer groups and associations which help in moulding the character and future of the individuals involved.
5. Differentiation of people in the society and validation of their social status. In most contemporary society, the acquisition of formal education and possession of some certificate ensure the entry of individual into prestigious jobs. That is, the higher the certificate, the more highly placed the individual within his profession. Therefore the proliferation of professions and skills and the graduation of diplomas help to put people into various categories. Thus, education has become a source of class formation as well as social mobility.

### **Types of Education in Rural Nigeria**

There are various forms of formal educational facilities in rural Nigeria. These include the followings:

- 1. Extension Education:** This is an informal out-of-school education given to rural families by experts in agriculture, home economics, health, small-scale industries among others. This type of education is often known as extension education.
- 2. Adult Education:** This is semi-formal literacy education organised for adults who had no opportunity to acquire formal education at earlier age.

**3. Formal Education:** This is the type of education offered at the primary and secondary levels to rural children and adolescents. At the primary level, two main types of education can be identified in Nigeria. These are the western type of education and the koranic type of education with the latter being more prevalent in the Moslem areas in Nigeria.

### **The Religious Institutions**

Societies make distinctions between the sacred (anything that is considered to be part of the supernatural world and that inspires awe, respect, and reverence) and the profane (anything considered to be part of the ordinary world and, thus, commonplace and familiar). This distinction is the basis for all religions (systems of roles and norms that are organized around the sacred realm and that bind people together in social groups). Religion is a basic institution, yet it exists in many different forms because different societies give sacred meaning to a wide variety of objects, events, and experiences.

Religion is defined as consisting of institutionalised systems of beliefs, values and symbolic practices which provide groups of men with solutions to their question of ultimate meaning – death, difficulties, suffering, etc. (Glock and Stark, 1998). Milton (1996) has also defined religion as “the attempt to bring the relative, the temporary, and the painful things of life into relation with what is conceived to be permanent, absolute and cosmically optimistic”. Religion is a universal human institution. It entails a set of basic beliefs and ritualistic practices. These beliefs and practices however vary from one religious organisation to another and responsible for the multiplication of religious organisations in society. Religious practices and thoughts are often associated with descriptions such as power, invisible, mighty, all-pervasive omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, mysterious, miraculous, super-natural and everlasting being. Basically there are three types of religion in Nigeria; the Christianity, Islamic religion and Traditional religion.



### **Functions of Religion**

Religion fulfils certain universal functions which include:

1. The explanation of the unknown and irregular physical occurrences e.g flood, earthquakes, drought, lightening, etc.
2. The justification of human existence by stating the nature and role of man in terms of super-natural design.
3. Promotion of group solidarity as religion is a cultural possession.
4. The celebration of human achievement. That is, most rituals are connected with some crucial periods in the society. Examples are puberty, planting of crops, harvest, etc.
5. Strengthening of moral order and promotion of social control.
6. Support for other social organisations and institutions, e.g schools, hospital, welfare agencies, etc.
7. The rationalisation of individual suffering in the material world thereby making such suffering bearable (Ekong 2010).

### **The Political Institution**

Political institutions are concerned with the distribution of power in society. Two concepts, which are critical to the understanding of political institutions, are power and authority. Power is the ability of individuals or groups to carry out their will even when opposed by others. It implies that those who hold power do so at the cost of others. There is a fixed amount of power in a society and if some wield power others do not. In other words, an individual or group does not hold power in isolation; they hold it in relation to others. This notion of power is fairly inclusive and extends from family elders assigning domestic duties to their children to principals enforcing discipline in school; from the General Manager of a factory distributing work among the executives to political leaders regulating programmes of their parties. The principal has power to maintain discipline in school. The president of a political party possesses power to expel a member from the party. In each case, an individual or group has power to the extent to which others abide by their will. In this sense, political activities or politics is concerned with ‘power.

A political system refer to a set of rules and some apparatus for keeping social order, distributing power and allowing decisions to be made in a society. The ultimate aim of the system is the achievement of set goals of the group.

The issues of ‘power’ and ‘authority’ are central to all political systems. While power is the ability to manipulate others with or without their consent, authority is the formally recognized right to exercise power (Rose, Glazer and Glazer, 1976).

Weber (1947) distinguished between traditional authority conferred by custom and accepted practice; legal-rational authority made legitimate by law, and charismatic authority which is power legitimized by the charisma of the individual.

Political institutions serve the people of a nation in form of governments in their traditional and modern forms which exist at the local, state and national levels. They serve executive, legislative and judiciary functions at each level and also relate citizens to each level of government in the performance of these functions. Each level of government also relates to the other in a systematic and coordinated fashion, frequently ensuring a division of labour. A system of political organisation is fashioned within which the philosophy and methodology of governance and selection of active participants in the political process evolve.

Nigeria still retains much of their traditional political forms at the local level, although the modern political structure exists side by side with the traditional forms. The latter which had influenced the lives of the citizens over a much longer period than the former, still controls much of the daily activities of the local people.

Contemporary modern societies operate political systems like democracy, totalitarianism, monarchy, parliamentary system etc. In democracy, participation of the masses, equality, justice, accountability, free and fair elections are emphasized. This is unlike in monarchy where a family rules for generations. Totalitarianism on its part is a restrictive political form that estranges the people from governance.

### **Functions of Political Institution**

- a. It is responsible for day to day administration and maintenance of law and order in society.
- b. It makes, interprets and enforces rules and regulations/laws in her area of authority.
- c. It protects lives and properties of members of the society from internal and external threats.
- d. It maintains relations on behalf of members of a society, with other social groups for mutual benefit of the two groups.
- e. It is a veritable tool for harvest of public opinion and decision making in society.

### **Economic Institution**

The economic institution in any culture is often concerned with the arrangement of relationships between people for the sustained production, distribution and consumption of goods and services within that culture or between it and another culture (Mbiti, 2003). The family as we have earlier discussed, is the basic economic unit in any society. That is, it acts as the basic unit of production and consumption. As a society advances and becomes more complex, specialisation of functions often sets in to the extent that the function of production and distribution of goods becomes transferred to industrial and commercial firms. The family however, still plays the important role of providing the labour or manpower for production and distribution within these organisations.

The basic factors of production in any economy have been identified as land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship. Karl (1992), however, holds that of all these, labour is the most crucial and that labour produces capital and entrepreneurship. In addition to labour, land is equally very important.

Economic institutions provide basic physical subsistence for society and meet basic needs for food, shelter, clothing and other necessities. Included are the economic institutions of production – agriculture, industry, and the distribution, exchange and consumption of commodities, goods and services necessary for human survival. Secondary institutions included within the major economic institutions are credit and banking systems, advertising and cooperatives.

Egbue and Edokobi (2002) identified the following economic systems among preindustrial societies:

- i. Hunting and Gathering Societies:** These are the earliest form of economic system. It was composed of small groups of people related to one another who constantly migrate in search of food. They had minimal technology and lacked division of labour. Also, there was little inequality in terms of material goods. The basis for social differentiation was ascribed characteristics as gender, age and family background.
- ii. Horticultural Societies:** They were less nomadic and planted seeds and crops with the aid of digging sticks and hoes. Technology remained limited. This economic system which emerged more than 900 years ago achieved some social surplus in food production to meet the needs of those not engaged in agriculture. This development gave room for specialization in other tasks within horticultural societies.
- iii. Agrarian societies:** It is the last stage of pre-industrial development. Members primarily engaged in production of food enhanced by technological innovations and bounteous harvest. Division of labour and specialization was more extensive.

On the other hand, industrial societies according to Dushkin (1991) are societies that rely chiefly on mechanization for production of their goods and services. This is in contrast to post-industrial societies which are technologically advanced nations whose economic system have shifted from manufacturing to service industries with processing and control of information at centre stage. Industries may however be categorized as primary, secondary or tertiary. At onset of industrialization in a society, production is usually at primary industrial stage.

According to Scheafer and Lamm (1997), contemporary industrial societies are characterized by two competing economic systems of capitalism and socialism.

- a. Capitalism.** This is an economic system in which the means of production are largely in private hands and the main incentive for economic activity is accumulation of

- profits (Rosenberg, 1991). There are two major variants of capitalism related to the degree to which private ownership, profit making and economic activity are regulated by government. These are the laissez faire model where there is minimal government intervention and the contemporary model where extensive government regulation of economic relations is the rule. Capitalist systems may also differ in terms of the extent to which monopoly and free enterprise system are allowed.
- b. **Socialism.** In socialist economic system, the means of production and distribution in society are collectively, rather than privately owned. It is intended to eliminate economic exploitation, meet people's needs and does not emphasize profits. Government occupies a central position in planning economic activities. She exercises maximum control on what and how to produce. There is also a deep commitment to social service programmes in socialist economies. It is noteworthy that communism as a final stage of socialism anticipated by Karl Marx is yet to materialize in any nation.
  - c. **Mixed Economy.** This is an economic system that is partly capitalist and partly socialist. In this model, free enterprise systems are punctuated by deliberate government controls of aspects of the economy. Such economies allow big corporations, petty businesses, and social security and welfare measures with considerable government regulation.

### **Functions of the Economic Institution**

Irrespective of the economic system in place in a society, the expected functions could be summarized as follows.

- a. To promote physical wellbeing of members through economic arrangements that ensure shelter, clothing and prompt satisfaction of other economic and bio-social needs.
- b. To manage the scarce resources of society in the most prudent manner possible.

- d. To distribute goods and services across socio-cultural and geographical divides with minimal disadvantages to social groups.
- e. To strive and maintain smooth, synergistic link with other social institutions for effective functioning of society.

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