THE POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTION OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING TO THE NEW PARTNERSHIP FOR AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Africa forms a large part of the developing world. It is continent with much natural resources but plagued by unemployment, poverty, diseases and civil wars. These problems may be due to lack of relevant knowledge and skills to assist people combat unemployment, disease and poverty. Most of the countries face skills shortages in various aspects of their economies, something which undermines the continent's development. This paper discusses the potential contribution of Open Distance Learning (ODL) to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). It argues that open distance learning has the potential to assist NEPAD to achieve its objectives — eradication of poverty, diseases and unemployment. It is assumed that when African Union states embrace open distance learning and make it a priority it can accelerate the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills for employment, eradication of poverty and ignorance as well as bring over-all improvement in the socio-economic and political situation of Africa.

Key words: education, open distance learning, development, NEPAD.

Introduction

Africa comprises 53 independent countries with a population of 900,465,411 which constitutes 14 % of the world's population (Internet World Statistics 2005:1). The continent is endowed with huge reserves of natural resources which include petroleum, gas, diamond, gold, bauxite, uranium, manganese, and platinum. It has abundant water resources — many large lakes and rivers — which can be developed for easy inland transportation, trade, cheap hydro power, fisheries and agriculture. The continent also boasts of various forests and forest products such as timber, sisal, coffee, cocoa, hides and skins. Africa's fertile lands have the potential to produce enough food to feed its growing population and for export. In spite of the huge natural

resources and possibilities the continent is generally under-developed and faces numerous problems ranging from diseases, poverty, political decay, instability, illiteracy and ignorance.

Before the 1960s (when most African countries gained political freedom) the West (i.e. Europe) exploited Africa's natural resources for the development of its countries. In the process it paid very little or no attention to the political and socio-economic (infrastructure and human) development of the continent. This unequal relationship based on exploitation has largely contributed to the underdevelopment and the so-called third world dependency syndrome. Although much of Africa's natural resources have been plundered by colonial powers, what remains have the potential to bring about rapid development of the continent under suitable conditions and proper management.

The urgent need to awaken the continent from its slumber and take responsibility for its own development gave birth to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2001. NEPAD seeks to undertake programmes which can lead to good governance and political stability on the continent in order for African countries to achieve socio-economic emancipation (NEPAD in Brief, 2005). To succeed in its endeavour, NEPAD must view education as the vehicle for its success. In view of the unique context of Africa, this paper argues that open distance learning (ODL) is the best option for the continent's rapid advancement. Through open distance learning Africans can be equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills that may be needed to exploit, manage and own the continent's natural and human resources.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

The New Partnership for Africa's Development was the initiative of Presidents Obasanjo (Nigeria), Mbeki (South Africa), Wade (Senegal) and Bouteflika (Algeria). These leaders engaged their Western counterparts for the possible total cancellation of the continent's external debts. They initiated what was referred to as the Millennium Partnership for African Recovery Programme (MAP).

At the OAU summit in Libya (2001) African leaders merged the various initiatives into what was then called the New African Initiative (NAI). The New African Initiative was changed to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) on 11 July 2001 at OAU Heads of State Conference in Lusaka, Zambia.

NEPAD was adopted as a strategic framework and action

document to resolve the problems facing the continent (NEPAD in Brief, 2005:1).

NEPAD is viewed as an important instrument for development that places Africa on the apex of the global agenda. It has created a tool for advancing a people-centred sustainable development and provided a common African platform from which to engage the rest of the international community in a dynamic partnership that holds real prospects for creating a better life for all Africans (AU 2002: NEPAD).

NEPAD's primary objective is to eradicate poverty in Africa and to place African countries both individually and collectively on the path of sustainable growth and development. In this way NEPAD can halt the marginalization of Africa in the globalization process (AU 2002: NEPAD).

The New Partnership for Africa's Development is committed to African ownership in order to meet the legitimate aspirations of the African peoples. NEPAD advocates for partnership with the international community but wants such a relationship to be based on mutual respect and shared responsibility.

In order to realize the ideals and goals outlined above African leaders must have the political will to transform their education systems in a way that can lead to rapid political and socio-economic advancement of the African people. The leaders need to identify critical areas of transforming education such as the adoption of a unique system of delivery which can meet the human resource and technological needs of the continent.

Open Distance Learning: Its Potential Contribution to the New Partnership for Africa's Development

In an open distance learning situation, learning occurs where the teacher and the learner are removed in space and time from each other (Yates and Tilson 2000:7). Open distance learning is an organizational activity based on the use of teaching materials, in which the constraints on study are minimized either in terms of access, or time and place, pace, methods of study or any combination of these (Perraton, 2000:13).

The question of access, however, cannot be taken for granted as there is no guarantee that the mere existence of distance education takes care of accessibility. In fact, there could be distance education without access.

In this discussion the two concepts — Distance Education and Open Learning — are deliberately combined and referred to as Open

Distance Learning (ODL). Open distance learning has some peculiarities which are absent from the conventional face-to-face education system. Perhaps the greatest advantage of ODL over conventional face-to- face is its flexibility. ODL students, unlike face-to-face system of education, can learn and contribute to the development of their communities even as they study.

In the view of Quan-Baffour (2000:43) the realization that in the contemporary world human contact is not the only way for knowledge and skills acquisition has made ODL, through the use of technology, a unique and important part of education. Kaye and Harry (1982: preface) add that broadcasting, be it through radio or television, in conjunction with local provision provide effective ways of teaching groups that might not otherwise be reached. Multi-media methods using distance learning as their thrusts have already proved successful in a wide range of countries and contexts for formal education.

It is argued here that the above realities of ODL make it a unique strategy to assist NEPAD to achieve most of its objectives. Openness in distance education may mean widespread access and participation of all people who have the inclination to learn. This system of education provides students with choices. They can, for example, enrol for a number of courses, they are capable of studying at any time of the year, learn specific knowledge and skills and complete within specific time frames without any restriction.

To make distance education open the learning content and syllabi of courses should be contextualized in order to reflect the learning needs, values and aspiration of the learners and their entire communities. It is only when distance education is open that it can contribute to the achievement of NEPAD's objectives such as the promotion of good governance for peace, stability, economic growth and increased employment, eradication of illiteracy, diseases, reduction of poverty and inequality; acceleration of regional and continental integration and anchoring the development of Africa on its resources and resourcefulness of its people ·

Open distance learning has become the practice rather the norm in the contemporary world. In many parts of the modern world almost all conventional tertiary institutions are also involved in some kind of distance education to provide many people with learning opportunities (Evans and Nation 1996). The need to change with the times in order to meet the learning needs of the contemporary society has ushered in the rapid demand for distance teaching and learning opportunities.

In Africa, conventional face-to-face universities are faced with ever-

increasing enrolment. To cope with the growing number of students, it is imperative for African countries to provide higher institutions with the necessary support to enable them to devise alternative delivery system to the existing conventional face-to-face teaching and learning.

The conventional face-to-face mode of delivery can only reach a few people in Africa. To make education available to many potential learners on the continent, it is crucial to find alternative ways. An important alternative route is open distance learning. ODL is viewed as a good partner in the education process because it has the potential to contribute immensely to formal, non-formal and informal education and training of Africans. ODL can also be used to fill in the gaps or offer initial and basic education for millions of the people on the continent. Indeed, distance education is a very important tool for development. Harris and Williams (1977:4) attest to this fact when they remark:

> There might have been no Western commercial and industrial revolution in the late 19th and early 20th century in all its momentum and power without distance or correspondence education. Distance education was indeed half-hidden reinforcement and background to the more visible improvement of the formal education system at the time of the Industrial Revolution.

This means when African countries provide infrastructure, financial resources and political support, tertiary institutions offering ODL programmes can meaningfully contribute to the achievement of NEPAD objectives in various ways as illustrated in the paragraphs below.

Human Resources Development

Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions have the potential to contribute to the development of human resource needs of Africa. At the time African countries attained political independence they might not have had enough qualified and trained personnel to man their respective bureaucracies and economies. In that state of inadequate human resources African countries had to start with semi-trained and educated personnel.

Although expensive, many African states had to engage the services of experts from the West to help build their economies. These

experts, from former colonial countries, hardly understand the African context and usually leave after the end of their contracts. Quan-Baffour (2000:32) points out that as less skilled people are on the job in the various sectors of the economy, additional specialized education and training must be offered to equip them to cope with the new tasks entrusted to them.

In line with the objectives of NEPAD Open distance learning delivery strategies — through multi-media —can improve the skills of workers. With rapid changes taking place in the contemporary world, civil servants need to learn new skills (e.g. computer and accounting skills) in order to be more productive.

These workers are adults who are already working. They may not need to leave work to go back to school. Instead, they can be equipped with new skills while on their jobs. It is believed when the knowledge and skills of workers are upgraded in this way the continent's economies can be improved, owned and managed effectively by its own citizens instead of depending on the so called 'experts' from the West.

The upgrading of knowledge and skills of all under-qualified professionals and civil servants such as teachers, nurses, technicians, accountants, administrators, army, police etc. through open distance learning can, in no doubt, increase productivity and efficiency.

In view of knowledge explosion in the modern world, no knowledge and skills can stand the test of time. This makes it imperative for even the knowledge and skills of the very well trained personnel to be upgraded through open distance learning mode as a strategy to improve efficiency and productivity.

Commenting on how modern technology assist in open distance education delivery, Parmaji (1984:22) writes:

> The greatest contribution of media in distance education is that media have widened the frontiers of education available to the public. Supplemented by an effective, auxiliary face-to-face interpersonal network, media effect is tremendous and entire societies can be changed and modernised in a short span of time.

A majority of workers in all African countries are adults, parents and bread winners who may not be able to leave work and go back to school. Moreover, these workers are scattered in all regions and communities in the various countries of the continent making it impossible to be reached and taught through the conventional face-to-face mode of delivery.

It is in this regard that the Open Distance Learning can become an indispensable tool to fill in the gap by providing the continent's work force with an alternative education and training system which can offer them with the opportunity to earn and learn. Evans (1997:15) for example attests to the fact that in most open and distance learning student learning occurs independently on the course materials they have been provided by their lecturers.

The discussion here has emphasized the flexibility of ODL and this convenience could be exploited as an advantage and in line with NEPAD objectives to establish a strong and modernized human resource base for the new Africa.

Economic Benefits of Open Distance Learning

One of the objectives of NEPAD is to reduce unemployment and alleviate poverty among the continent's people. Open Distance Learning has the potential to provide the unemployed (youth, men and women) with knowledge and skills they may require to play meaningful roles in socio-economic and political lives of their respective communities.

Unemployment is a big problem in all African countries largely because of lack of relevant knowledge and skills. The provision of open distance learning opportunities can equip many of the unemployed population with the skills and knowledge not only for employment in the formal sector but also for self-employment.

Many people can learn entrepreneurial skills which may enable them to start their own projects or businesses and even employ some of their community members. This can reduce unemployment, poverty, hunger and diseases among millions of Africans, especially women and children who live mostly in rural parts of the continent.

The establishment and management of small, micro and medium scale businesses such as Bed and Breakfast (B&B), leather shop (local shoe and bag manufacturing), caravan park,fishing, boating and secretarial services in the rural tourism industry are cases in point.

Local economic development initiatives like those mentioned above may not only reduce the unemployment problems of the continent but also have the capacity to reduce the influx of many of the youth to African cities in search of non-existing jobs.

The acquisition of skills, through open distance learning, for self-employment can also reduce the crime, alcohol, prostitution, drug and human trafficking among the youth in African countries. In this way the continent can enjoy economic stability being advanced by NEPAD.

Social Benefits of Open distance Learning

ODL institutions can assist African states to fight illiteracy through the provision of literacy programmes. Illiteracy is one of the major problems facing the African continent. Acknowledging this fact, the New Partnership for Africa's Development aims at encouraging African countries to eradicate or drastically reduce illiteracy on the continent.

The problem of illiteracy can be tackled through the training of basic education facilitators for various communities through the distance teaching and learning mode. When literacy teachers are trained via open distance learning they can then teach literacy and numeracy (i.e. basic education) to adults in their respective communities.

Adult basic education comprises programmes which are equivalent to primary and or junior secondary education. According to Yates and Tilson (2000:7) basic education includes those programmes with alternative curricula, including such areas as basic health, nutrition, family planning, literacy, agriculture and other life related and vocational skills. Several millions of adults (men and women) and even teenagers in Africa lack basic education. These illiterate can be taught through open distance learning programmes. In most African countries because of remoteness of some places which is due in part to geographical circumstances, political problems, scattered communities, poor roads and transport networks many potential and ambitious adults are denied access to education.

Learning opportunities must be opened to people living under different and difficult circumstances to contribute to the over all development of the continent as advocated by NEPAD. Open distance learning, through the use of multi-media can offer the promise of reaching out to remote areas where the training needs are greatest and the absence of training facilities is most acute.

The traditional approach to education which is characterized by 'chalk and talk' cannot rapidly help solve the colonial legacy of illiteracy and lack of skills among Africans hence the need to educate, train and retrain more adults the ODL way. The more Africans become literate the more social problems among them are likely to be addressed.

The University of South Africa's Institute for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) has already made a mark in the training of basic education (including literacy, numeracy and life skills) educators in the Sub-continent (i.e. Southern Africa) through distance teaching and learning. Similar and emerging open distance learning institutions on the continent can learn and adopt the UNISA Adult Basic Education

and Training (ABET) model to help provide basic education to the millions of Africa's nationals.

With conducive political climate and financial support, open distance learning institutions can increase the literacy levels on the continent. In this way NEPAD's goal of eradication of ignorance and illiteracy on the continent could be achieved. The increase of literacy levels among rural people, especially women, means many of them can access written information on family planning and HIV/AIDS. It may also provide people with business opportunities and make them aware of their rights as citizens of their countries and the continent at large.

The access to information can assist individuals, communities, countries and the continent at large in fighting the HIV/ AIDS pandemic and also control population growth. The escalating growth of population and spread of HIV/AIDS on the continent, particularly among women, can be explained in terms of the high illiteracy levels among millions of Africans. Thomas, Crow *et al.* (1994:60) are more than apt when they write:

> It is widely accepted that female education and health are correlated, and female literacy rates have direct impact on demographic variables such as fertility and infant mortality for developing countries. An educated and informed female population will bring about a lowering of population growth rates, lowering infant mortality rate. This will assist countries to reach other developmental goals.

Through open distance learning formal, non-formal and informal lessons can be taught on radio and television to provide millions of learners with the fundamental techniques in farming (e.g. ploughing, sowing, fertilising, harvesting) and maintenance of simple farm implements such as hoes and rakes.

When many people on the continent are able to produce food the problem of famine can be reduced if not eradicated and NEPAD would have achieved its goal of reducing famine, poverty and diseases among millions of Africans.

There are many adult citizens in Africa who, through open distance learning, can also be taught basic hygiene, nutrition, child care, economics, sociology, geography and politics which will enable them to contribute to the development of their respective communities and the continent at large.

Open distance learning also has a crucial role to play by making education available and accessible to diverse populations in Africa. ODL mode of delivery has a unique advantage to cater for the learning needs of people who because of physical circumstances, political conditions, geographical isolation, family or career responsibilities cannot attend conventional face-to-face courses.

In some cases many citizens of the continent lose their jobs because automation does away with the demand for unskilled labour and replaces it with skilled technologists. Through open distance learning unskilled and semi-skilled workers throughout the continent can learn new skills or diversify their skills not only to save jobs but also know more and perhaps earn more.

The painful fact is that no matter how effective contemporary education may be, it can never fully prepare the youths to meet the world as it will be when they are adults. Open distance learning therefore enables people to undertake lifelong learning in order to keep the balance between personal and circumstances in the changing world. In this way the social stability envisaged by NEPAD could be a reality in Africa.

Political Benefits of Open Distance Learning

Education in general and literacy in particular has the capacity to raise political consciousness among people and control ethnic conflicts in Africa. It can be argued that in the western countries ethnic conflicts are rare cases largely because their citizens are educated.

Well-informed people may critically examine the consequences of their actions on the whole community or country and are more likely to find alternative solutions to political problems instead of destabilizing a whole province or country. When, through open distance learning, millions of Africans acquire basic education they may turn ethnicity into advantage for community development instead of using it for the destruction of their own communities.

The provision of basic education (literacy, numeracy and life skills) by open distance learning institutions can empower millions of people on the continent to understand what freedom or democracy means and their responsibilities as citizens to uphold and protect it. Through ODL community members, leaders and politicians could learn more about good governance and practise the principles of NEPAD in order to ensure political stability on the continent at both local and national government levels.

Education for citizenship may encourage Africans to avoid greed, corruption, mismanagement, understand, question and interpret, agree or disagree with governments on policy issues.

When millions of Africans are educated through ODL mode they may know and understand how to vote, who to vote for and change governments through the ballot box and not through bayonets and bullets. As the saying goes, "Education makes people easy to govern but difficult to muzzle." Well-informed citizens cannot be used as 'voting cattle' to be 'milked' only at the time of elections for political gains by the few educated people on the continent.

ODL offers opportunities for millions of African to be well informed about their responsibilities as citizens and contribute to the development and sustainability of democracy and stability in Africa. Thus education for civic responsibility can be realized through open distance learning. To educate is to liberate, goes the saying.

Forms of Basic Education that ODL Institutions Can Offer Africa

Basic education through distance delivery mode can take two forms viz:

- In-school programmes. This, in most cases, can focus on the delivery of an approved school curriculum to a captured audience in conventional face-to-face schools. An example of this is (my) lived experience of the quality enhancement programmes offered by the Lesotho Distance Teaching Service which broadcasts specific lessons to schools during specific school times. This can be emulated and practised in other African countries.
- Out-of-school programmes. This could be distance education programmes supplemented by frequent radio contacts, which deliver normal school courses to learners (adults and or youth) living in isolated geographical regions. Yates and Tilso (2000:8) add that various other approaches have been designed to serve smaller more focused populations like the nomadic or itinerant groups.

The out-of-school distance education programmes can be used in providing basic education to shepherds (boys and adults) in rural communities where agricultural activity such as animal rearing does not permit some children to attend regular schools. Yates and Tilson (2000:9) add that out–of–school programmes for adults involve the

provision of basic education through a wide range of models of distance and open learning. These may include study group system and mass media campaigns common in newly independent African states like Ghana, Zambia, Tanzania, Namibia and Botswana. The experiences from these local and small efforts can be adopted and co-ordinated by distance education institutions for other parts of the continent.

Possible challenges to ODL in Africa

Although Open distance learning has the potential to contribute to the realisation of the objectives of NEPAD it may face some challenges. Some of the possible challenges of NEPAD are briefly outlined here:

- Unemployment is a major problem on the African continent and the provision of knowledge and skills among millions of Africans who cannot find work could be daunting. It may require funds and resources which could be very difficult to find as a result of poor economic situation in most African countries. Thus for ODL institutions to be able to provide relevant knowledge, NEPAD will have to provide funds for such education programmes. In that way there could be some synergy between ODL and NEPAD in their fight to reduce unemployment, poverty, ignorance and disease.
- Commitment to NEPAD agenda by all African countries is still a challenge. There are some African leaders who are not yet committed to the ideals of NEPAD either because they do not want to democratize or are suspicious that NEPAD is not a true African 'baby' but imperialist machination and propaganda. The leaders of the African Union would therefore have to work hard to convince their counterparts who are still sitting on the fence, (mere spectators) who are indifferent to the NEPAD idea and praxis. They need to be on board in the implementation of the NEPAD agenda in order to speed up Africa's rejuvenation and development.
- The poor economic situation of many African states may limit the purchase, installation, maintenance and possible utilization of expensive, sophisticated and powerful machines like computers, internet, television, video conferencing equipments and radio stations which are *sine qua non* to effective open distance learning delivery. In addition to this, technical expertise in management of open distance learning equipments may be limited in Africa and

the use of expertise from outside the continent could be costly.

- Inadequate infrastructure could be another problem. Some African countries lack infrastructure such as constant electricity supply and its reliability. Electricity may not have reached all the remote communities of the continent. In most cases only urban residents enjoy some amount of electricity and for that matter may have access to internet cafés where they can pay and access information. Even in areas where electricity exists the demand surpasses supply and it may have to be rationed. This means the use of technology may be limited due to inadequate power supply on the continent.
- Transmission times of radio and television and changes in frequencies on transmitter radios may not always suit open distance learners. Most learners may be engaged in economic activities such as farming, herding of animals, working in mines or factories during the times of broadcast.
- Political upheavals and prolonged civil conflicts may either disrupt learning programmes or destroy installations for ODL delivery. Rebels in war torn countries could destroy installations meant for distance teaching and learning.

Efforts are being made by the African Union to address some of the problems that can confront ODL. The African Union, for example, has instituted mechanisms such as the peer review, establishment of African parliament and a continental army to monitor 'hot spots' on the continent. These measures aim at bringing about good governance, accountability and stability on the continent although it may be too early to judge their successes.

Conclusion

This paper explored the potential contributions Open Distance Learning could make to the realization of the objectives of the New Partnership for Africa's Development. The paper has argued that open distance learning can provide millions of Africans with education at their door steps. When education is accessible many Africans can acquire knowledge and skills that may enable them to play meaningful roles in the development of economic, social and political institutions on the continent. Well informed and skilled citizens can assist in addressing HIV/AIDS, unemployment, poverty and ethnic conflicts facing the continent.

However, economic problems and lack of commitment to NEPAD

agenda among some African leaders may hinder the funding and establishment of ODL institutions throughout Africa. But with the establishment of mechanisms to enhance good governance, many African countries may subscribe to the ideals and principles of NEPAD and could look up to ODL as a partner in addressing the socio-economic and political problems that confront the continent.

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