OPEN FLEXIBLE LIFELONG LEARNING AS A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Educational provision in developing sub-Saharan Africa states has been severely hindered by the hydra-headed problems of access, cost and quality. Amidst these challenges is the pledge of regional and national education policymakers and development planners to ensure that there is maximum access equitable and qualitative education for all (EFA) in Africa. There is also a burning need for improved literacy levels and functional education, in order to overcome the development deficits that are currently facing the region. The pledge of education for all resonates the agreement which representatives of several nations of the world signed at the Jomtien summit on Education for All and the subsequent evaluation meetings. Following this pledge, several developing, sub-Sahara African nations have evolved initiatives for instituting sustainable Open Flexible Learning (ODL) systems in order to meet up with the seemingly intractable EFA objectives.

This paper examined the potential impact of these OFL initiatives on the achievement of the EFA objectives which is seen as the basis of development planning, administration and implementation in Africa. It identified the various challenges confronting effective implementation of ODL on the continent, amidst the need to expand access to educational opportunities.

An attempt was made to situate the OFL system at the centre of the strategies for achieving these EFA objectives in the region and finally, a proposal for sustainable policy initiatives for implementing OFL systems for the attainment of education for all in Africa is made.

Keywords: open and distance, development, life-long learning, flexible learning, education for all, innovation

INTRODUCTION

There is an established consensus among practitioners and policy makers that education is a fundamental pillar of the development process. This may be accounted for by the use of knowledge and education for economic empowerment and solution to problems of social inequality. It is also regarded as a major pillar of the development apparatus, because overtime societies have used the process and products of education to overcome artificial social, political and economic boundaries that have perennially stood in their path to growth and development. Thinking about agents of change and development, education indeed has been the single most significant of them all.

All that humans have achieved so far may be attributed to education of one type or the other and what has not been achieved to lack of it.

However, the dominant mode of education remains the school, college or university in which students come together to meet their teachers or instructors face-to-face, in the formalized environment of the classroom.

Nearly all the literature on the impact of the systems and processes of education on social and economic development [in Africa] deals with the experience of those who are charged with managing this all-time popular mode of education.

Meanwhile the Open Flexible Learning (OFL) mode, sometimes called open and distance learning, open/distance education, distributed learning, etc, which is a form of non-formal education system, has evolved as an alternative mode of education to cater for the rigidity and inadequacies of the formal mode of education. The lifelong learning component of the OFL makes it all the more attractive as it has the potential of solving much of Africa's development conundrum.

The conventional education systems with its rigid adherence to things such as entry point requirements, specified locales and periods for contact with instructors, rigid examination requirements etc. has continued to restrict access to large numbers of interested participants. But the open flexible learning mode with its permissive entry point consideration, flexibility of duration, place and mode of instruction has created an avenue for expanding access to education for vast proportion of the population.

It has also evolved a system of qualitative and socially relevant instructional content which exceeds that of the conventional mode, based on its application of interdisciplinary course team approach to course development and flexibility of content to respond to changing social dynamics.

It is worth noting that OFL is not education in itself, rather it is only a mode of education with potentialities and possibilities to serve as a more influential agent of social change and development than the extant formal approach to instructional delivery and learning.

Development is not an easy term to saddle with a conventional definition. There are as many definitions of the concept as there are organizations and individuals who have attempted universally acceptable definitions of this amorphous concept. Two reasons may be proffered for this.

First, many who attempt to define it do so from the point of view of individual disciplinary studies, e.g. economists view development in terms of higher productivity and equitable distribution of resources among individuals, states and societies; psychologists construe it in the terms of intellectual achievement and emotional well-being; environmentalists consider it as the utilization of natural/environmental resources in ways that do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their aims and aspirations; sociologists described it as the process of releasing, organizing and converting human energy into social capacity and material results. Obviously, it is difficult to select a single all-encompassing view to describe the subject of development in the face of these multiple perspectives, for even within disciplines there are several schools of thought regarding the issue.

Another reason for the elusiveness of the concept for a universally acceptable definition is because development is not some kind of fixed, immutable target or destination that may be attained merely by striving sufficiently hard, but a dynamic or moving target whose attainment at each point in time is facilitated by a set of strategies that are themselves also dynamic.

Thus, when the track-record of education as a social institution is considered, it reveals the fact that changes and development in human societies have gone hand in hand with those of education itself. Education has come along way from its being dependent on the environment (during the era of the primitive cavemen) through its labour and craft orientation (when humans had a communal system of association), to its stage of serving as personal embellishment(due to the advent of monastic institutions dedicated to sectarian values, ethics and morals) and today a means of faster economic development (as a result of establishment of modern institutions for teaching/learning science, astronomy and technology) to have become synonymous with growth or development itself (which is direct consequence of the information explosion that has led to the advent of what we call 'knowledge societies'). Ordinarily, man should legitimately be proud of these developments and no less of the institution of education which has responded to human needs from generation to generation as it not only accommodates changes in its own salient characteristics, but in turn effects and manages changes within human societies as well.

However, this celebration is short-lived when one reviews the state of educational development in Africa, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. UNESCO Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura lamented this in his foreword to the Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2006 that "...the goal to achieve gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005 had not been met, despite rapid progress, especially in a number of low income countries (many of which are in Africa)".

The report also emphasized in the EFA-progress assessment of countries and regions that 'there is need for continued focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, south and west Asia and the Arab states (p.73). Similarly, the Human Development Report 2005, published by the UNDP reported adverse human development indices for countries in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in terms meeting the Millennium Development Goals (pp. 4, 5). African nations in general are placed at the base of the development pyramid, especially when parameters such as literacy and enrolment, access to quality healthcare, maternal and infant mortality, access to basic social amenities, gender empowerment, environmental sustainability etc. are considered. Though, education in the region, especially in terms of access, equity and quality leaves a great deal to be desired, yet the premise that education is a necessary ingredient for sustainable development remains valid even in the light of these challenges. But a review of the extant approach indicates a gross inadequacy in terms of meeting the needs of the population of people in the sub-region. It is therefore reasonable that OFL as the latest along the path of socio-educational evolution is being situated at the centre of the development discourse in Africa, with emphasis on the lifelong learning. This article looks at Open Flexible Learning - a system of education in which the teacher and the taught are separated by distance -and attempts to project it as the missing leg in the development planning stool of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The article commences by looking at the definitional imperatives of the key concepts identified in the title of the paper: Open Flexible Learning; Lifelong Learning and Development Discourse and attempts to weave a tapestry of interrelationships between them and issues of development in sub-saharan Africa.

Open Flexible Learning
OFL has earlier been described as another name for open and distance learning (ODL), which is a more popular term for describing this mode of education, though in time we will come to appreciate this author's preference for the term OFL rather than its more popular synonym of ODL. ODL describes a learning arrangement in which the teaching behaviours are carried out at a location geographically remote from that in which the learning behaviours are exhibited.

The concept is not only an amalgam of two broad concepts – open learning and distance education, it also comprises varying notions of educational delivery that seeks more and more to make the learner responsible for his learning experiences, with the aid of communications and information technologies. The term *Open learning* refers to policies and practices that permit entry to learning with minimum or no barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning. These policies need not be part of a distance education system but are complementary to it. *Distance education* on the other hand refers to the process of delivery of learning or training to those who are separated mostly by time and space from those who are teaching or training. The teaching is done with a variety of "mediating processes" used to transmit content, provide tuition and conduct assessment or measure outcomes.

Other ancillary concepts of ODL include *Flexible learning, which* relates to the provision of learning opportunities that can be accessed at any place and time in schedules that are convenient to the learner. Flexible learning focuses more on scheduling of learning rather than on a specific mode, thus it may find expression in the traditional conventional systems as well as the open and distance learning system.

Terms such as *Online learning and e-learning* have emerged to describe the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance distance education, implement open learning policies, make learning activities more flexible and enable those learning activities to be distributed among many learning venues. The term *distributed learning,*·emphasizes the learning itself rather than the type of technology used or the separation between teacher and learner it also focuses on making learning possible beyond classrooms; and when combined with classroom modes, it becomes *flexible learning. Virtual education* includes aspects of both online and e-learning but goes somewhat further.

While it is largely web-centric it does not necessarily limit itself to learners outside a conventional classroom. It uses multimedia and, besides delivering content, also enables a high level of interaction among learners, content, teachers, peers and administration both synchronously and asynchronously.

The emphasis on learning, the flexibility of access and learner-centeredness which focus on the integrity and freedom of the individual to select the sequences of study, negotiate learning objectives and content, learning methods, methods of assessment; and choice of support mechanisms makes the term Open Flexible Learning more attractive than open and distance learning , which focuses more on the remoteness of interaction and relationship.

Lifelong Learning

This is another challenging concept that grew out of the socio-educational evolution that humans have experienced. The first reference to what may be regarded as lifelong learning can be traced to the report of the International Commission on the Development of Education (1972), referred to as the Faure Report, in which members of the commission had argued, inter alia that:

> *"It is out of question that education to be confined, as in the past, to training the leaders of tomorrow's society in accordance with some predetermined scheme of structures, needs and ideas or to preparing the young , once and for all, for a given type of existence. Education is no longer the privilege of an elite or the concomitant of a particular age: to an increasing extent, it is reaching out to embrace the whole of society and the entire lifespan of the individual (p.160)."*

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Following the Commission's report a new vista in the process of education of the individual opened up and lifelong learning became an aspect of the global training and development systems. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (2006) it is as a philosophical concept in which learning is viewed as a long-term process beginning at birth and lasting throughout life; a conceptual framework within which the learning needs of people of all ages and educational and occupational levels may be met, regardless of their circumstances. The European Commission defined lifelong learning as "all purposeful learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective(*see Joachim Knoll ADD 64/65)*. These definitions are not very far from the vision of lifelong learning that was clearly enunciated in the Faure Report that:

> *...every citizen should have the means of learning, training and cultivating himself freely available to him (or her) under all circumstances, so that he will be in a fundamentally different position in relation to his own education. Responsibility will replace obligation (p.163).*

Building on the Faure Report, the Delors Report of 1996 enumerated four pillars of education - Learning to learn, Learning to do, Learning to live together, Learning to be (Delors) – to which the UNESCO Institute for Education has added a fifth: Learning to change (UIE, 2003). The critical rationale for lifelong learning is to provide learners with life skills for learning on their own rather than acquiring a set of compartmentalized skills and skills for confronting numerous tasks of varying orientations, requiring an amalgam of capabilities as opposed to just one specialized field of learning.

Development

As stated earlier, the term development defies a conventional definition. Proponents of definitions tend to consider it *from* the point of view of their disciplinary sciences. However, Allen (2000) enumerated three broad meanings or perspectives of the term 'development' in the literature, viz:

> ➢ as a vision, description or measure of the state of being of a desirable society;
> ➢ as an historical process of social change in which societies are transformed over long periods; and
> ➢ as consisting of deliberate efforts aimed at improvement on the part of various agencies, including governments, all kinds of organizations and social movements.

According to Seya (2005) development is a process of economic, social, political and cultural change engineered in a given society by the efforts of all stakeholders, both internal and external - including the local communities, the Government, the private sector, the civil society organizations, the NGOs and the technical and financial development partners – with a view to improving the conditions of life of the population in a sustainable way. Implicit in this definition is the assumption that development requires, *inter alia*, the formation of human capital and social capital, some of the main factors of production required for a broad-based economic growth that provides the ground for sustainable poverty reduction. For the purpose of this paper, development shall be considered as an innovation diffusion process which leads to the [positive] transformation of the entire social system. This definition presupposes that there is need for an innovative scheme which would have appositive impact on members of society, and the spread of this to as many groups as possible will be regarded as 'development'.

This spread can be actualized by taking into cognizance the critical elements of Seya's views, that the formation of human and social capital is a precondition for development in al ramifications- social, economic, political and cultural.

According to Jacobs and Cleveland (1999) development occurs when productivity rises, enabling people to produce more, earn more and consumes more. To do so, they have to be motivated to learn new skills, adapt to new network processes and adopt new technology, changes which in the past have met with considerable resistance.

THE STATE OF DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Having established the fact that development is a broad and amorphous concept, it is almost impossible to establish a single all encompassing notion of what development connotes. In development literature, especially the human development reports published by the UNDP since 1990, African, especially the Sub-Saharan region has consistently reported a low or sometimes adverse development. The literature on development in Africa has seemingly been pre-occupied with issues such as food security, territorial integrity of states, cultural strives, agricultural development and different forms of economic development, to mention a few. Sadly, little or nothing is said about the place of education in these discourses. The primary aim of this study is to position Open Flexible Lifelong Learning at the core of development struggle in Africa. This is because discourses evolve or hope to evolve into policies and practical implementation frameworks that would ultimately lead to a [positive] transformation, it is necessary therefore, that the attitudinal change required for holistic change in Africa be transmitted through the processes of training and education. To do this the notion of what is desirable development in Africa must be included in the education process and functional skills should be imbued emphasized at all phases of training and human development. In considering the state of development in Africa, many countries in Africa, especially the Sub-Saharan region have reported very negative development. According to the UNDP's human development index (HDI), a set of parameters for evaluating a country's progress in social and infrastructural terms has been applied as a nation's growth against universally agreed target, this is more so because data on which these assessments are based are supplied by the countries themselves. Such data are considered under the broad rubrics of life expectancy at birth; adult literacy rate; combined gross enrolment for primary, secondary and tertiary schools; and GDP per capita. It is particularly disheartening that 29 of the 31 countries ranked as having low human development indices are countries in Africa, except Yemen and Haiti (UNDP, 2005). It is equally disconcerting that Africa continues to score very low in the HDI ratings as indicated in Table: 1 below:

Similarly, the EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2006, using what is referred to as the EFA Development Index (EDI) submitted that many nations in Sub-Saharan Africa are at a serious risk of not meeting the EFA targets by 2015 (p.71). The EDI is based on;

> ➢ Universal Primary Education, proxied by the total primary net enrolment ratio;
> ➢ (ii) adult literacy, proxied by the literacy rates for persons aged 15 and above;
> ➢ (iii) gender parity, proxied by gender specific EDI (GEI), an arithmetic mean of Gender Parity Indices for primary and secondary gross enrolment ratio and adult literacy rate;
> ➢ (iv) quality of education, proxied by the survival rate to Grade 5. Tables 2a and 2b, show again that Sub-Saharan Africa ranks very low in the achievement levels of the EFA targets and is adversely positioned to meet EFA targets by 2015.

Figure: **1** — Human development improving in most regions

Hunan development index

Source: Human Development Report 2005
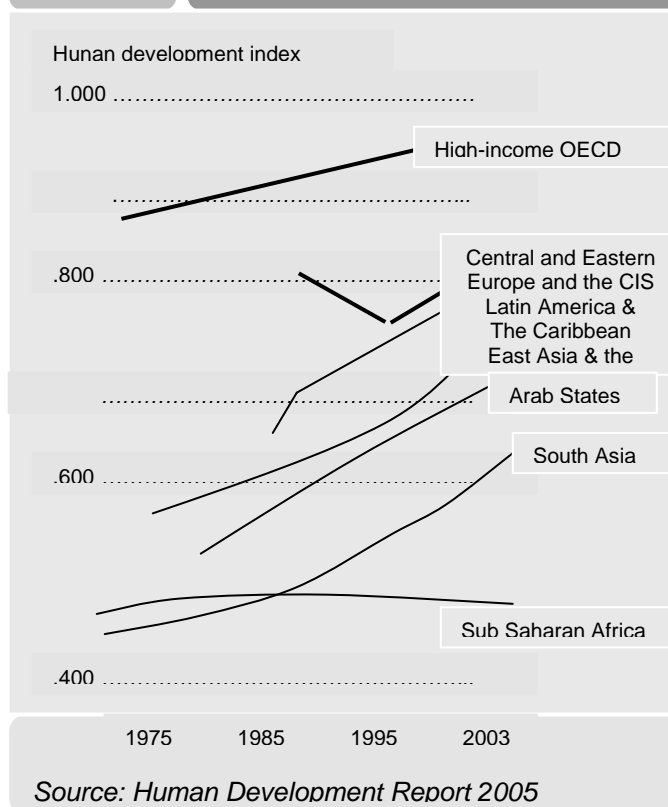
Table: 1
Distribution of Countries of EDI values by region, 2002

Region	Far from EFA: EDI below 0.80	Intermediate Position: EDI between 0.80 and 0.94	Close to EFA: EDI below 0.95 and 0.97	EFA achieved: EDI between 0.98 and 1.00
Sub-Saharan Africa	16	7	1	
Arab States	5	10	1	
Central Asia		2	1	2
East Asia and the Pacific	3	7	2	1
South and West Asia	3	1		
Latin America and the Caribbean	1	20	4	1
North America and Western Europe		1	7	8
Central and Eastern Europe		1	12	4
Total	28	49	28	16

Source: EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2006. p. 68.

Table: 2
Enrolment ratio of Basic Education, by region, 2002

Region	Total Enrolment	Gross Enrolment Ratios	Net Enrolment Ratios
World	671, 359	104	84.6
Developing countries	589,291	104	83.2
Developed countries	67,880	101	95.6
Countries in transition	14,187	106	89.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	19, 351	91	63.5
Arab States	37, 137	94	82.6
Central Asia	6396	102	89.9
East Asia and the Pacific	207, 054	111	92.1
South and West Asia	175, 527	102	82.5
Latin America and the Caribbean	69498	119	96.4
North America and Western Europe	51 945	101	95.3
Central and Eastern Europe	23 133	99	89.0

Source: Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006

Conflicts remain another grave challenge to the development process in Africa. In addition to the human development and educational development deficits, the prevalence of conflicts on the African continent has reached alarming rates and it is arguably the greatest impediment to any meaningful development on the continent today (Oche, 2000). Majority of conflicts on the African continent relate to governance problems and/or erosion of state control or "state failure". State failure or state collapse refers to a situation in which 'the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart'. It represents a situation in which the old order collapses and there is a general retreat to ethno –nationalism as the residual and viable form of identity. It is worth noting that by 1996 almost half the war related deaths in the world occurred in Africa and as at 1998, Africa had more armed conflicts than any other continent in the world. As a result, Africa accounts for over 8 million of the 22 million refugees worldwide (Mills, 1999). The foregoing shows that in terms of human development, defined by life expectancy at birth; adult literacy; combined gross enrolment and; GDP per capita, as well as EFA attainments, African countries are seriously left behind. The African continent also suffers a great governance deficit which has had deep impact on the processes and activities.

Open Flexible Lifelong Learning and Africa's Development

The Place of Education in development processes is easily understood, but lifelong learning is the critical factor in learning for development in the twenty-first century. All education systems and educative processes need to imbibe the issue of re-skilling and retooling and providing capabilities for learning how to learn. Such that the peoples of Africa will be able to approach their various development challenges from a more rational point of view after having overcome the most debilitating of all their development challenges which is 'illiteracy'. OFL is equipped with potentials and possibilities for combating this very gruesome ill of the African society. Through the flexible learning mode, large population of previously unreached groups can be reached and if knowledge and skills are adequately packaged to provide optimal learning experience, participants can affect their societies positively. In pushing the issue of Lifelong learning, Torres (2003) argued that:

Emphasize learning as the key organizing category, because it is learning that matters|. Learning is the purpose of education and training. Good (quality) education/training is one that ensures relevant and meaningful learning, motivation for learning and competencies to continue learning. Learning exceeds education, just as lifelong learning exceeds lifelong education....(p.38).

It is against this background that this paper argues that the development planning process must undergo a paradigmatic shift to include Open Flexible Learning which must be organized in such a way that it provides functional, relevant and transferable skills, attitudes and abilities that equips learners with competencies to learn and relearn overtime and over situations.

The development planning process in many African nations, regional and sub-regional organization must take into account the need for seamless transfer of knowledge within and among disciplines, geographical and political boundaries, in order to empower the people to overcome their development deficits. The flexibility of access and negotiable learning experiences that OFL provides can be optimally utilized through the provision of instructional content in formats that allow for self didactic activities. Given that OFL is the latest stage along the socio-educational evolution, lifelong learning is the essential factor that sets it apart from other forms of open distance learning system.

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