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TITLE : The role of Open and Distance Learning in
community development in Malawi

1. INTRODUCTION

Community development is a broad term applied to the practices and activities that concern the improvement of various aspects of local communities. The concept of community development seeks to empower individuals and groups of people by providing them with the skills they need to affect change in their own communities. The Community Development Challenge Report (2006), produced by UK-based Community Development Foundation for Communities and Local Government, defines community development as a set of values and practices which plays a special role in overcoming poverty and disadvantage, knitting society together at the grass roots and deepening democracy. It involves changing the relationships between ordinary people and people in positions of power to ensure that everyone takes part in issues affecting their lives. Community development emanates from the principle that within any community there is a wealth of knowledge and experience which, if used in a creative manner, can be channelled into collective action to achieve the communities' desired goals.

Open and distance education (ODL), though a relatively new concept in Malawi having been introduced in 1965 at a small scale, has a vital role to play in the development of communities in Malawi. It could enhance efforts towards the eradication of poverty and illiteracy, the ills which form the basis for retardation in development. ODL activities could help groups and networks of people take joint action on matters that concern them for the public good, and enable individuals to influence the decisions that affect their livelihood. The role of knowledge in transforming communities globally cannot be overemphasized. Malawian communities could utilize their acquired knowledge in the preservation and promotion of their individual cultures, languages and traditional economic practices in line with the principles of democracy and justice.

According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) 2007 report, deeply entrenched poverty is a major obstacle for development and growth in Malawi where about 8 million people (representing 70 percent of the total population) live below the national poverty line. Illiteracy is attributed as one of the major causes of this desperate situation. Lack of knowledge on the best practices in agriculture, health and sanitation, nutrition and sexuality has resulted into otherwise avoidable problems related to food insecurity at the household level, chronic malnutrition, escalation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and substandard health livelihood. The enhancement of ODL activities in Malawi could therefore improve standards of living for the rural poor.

2. PROGRESSION OF ODL IN MALAWI

Malawi is a country in Southern Africa with a population of approximately 13.1 million people. Basing on the Census Report (2008), the literacy rate in the country stands at 64 percent. In terms of economy, Malawi is listed as one of the least developed countries on the global economy scale and registered a GDP per capita of about US\$ 900 in 2009.

As hinted in Section 1, the onset of open and distance education in Malawi can be traced back to 1965 when the Malawi government established the Malawi Correspondence College (MCC) with the objective of providing secondary school education to primary school leavers who failed secure places in public schools. The MCC started with an initial enrolment of 1425 students and 25 members of staff but the student numbers rose to about 150, 000 by 1998.

In line with government plans, the MCC introduced the teacher-upgrading programme in 1983 to increase the teacher-training output in the country. This initiative complemented the work of teacher training colleges whose output, to the present day, fails by far to meet the teacher requirements at the primary school level. Furthermore, the MCC linked formal and non-formal education by providing expertise and resources needed in enhancing adult literacy programmes in the rural areas. Today, the Malawi College of Distance Education (MCDE), which resulted from a merge of the Malawi Correspondence College and the Schools Broadcasting Unit in 1972, has a total enrolment of 38, 000 students. The student enrolment at MCDE dropped considerably between 2000 and 2002 following the elevation of distance education centres into community day secondary schools. The MCDE caters for

two groups of students: open school students, who attend evening classes; and home-study students who study on their own.

In addition to the above efforts, the two public universities – University of Malawi and Mzuzu University – have also joined the cause in the promotion of ODL. The University of Malawi, which comprises five colleges administered under one central office, has put in place a number of ODL programmes. The Malawi Polytechnic, one of its constituent colleges, introduced a postgraduate diploma programme in Transportation Operations Management in 2005 under the NetTom programme which is being offered on distance education basis. Another constituent college, Chancellor College, recently launched e-learning programmes in several fields at the undergraduate as well as postgraduate level. These programmes are being offered in partnership with Amity University and Indira Gandhi National Open University both of India. In addition to that, Domasi College of Education, in conjunction with Chancellor College, is also running a Diploma in Education programme using distance education methodologies which targets teachers in community day secondary schools. In the Northern Region, Mzuzu University plans to launch its undergraduate programmes on distance education mode this year. All these efforts accentuate the interest at the tertiary level to enhance ODL initiatives in Malawi.

3. MAJOR ROLES OF ODL IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN MALAWI

There are many facets to the roles that ODL play in the development of communities. Although it might seem obvious that ODL performs a

pivotal function in advising and informing public authorities on community needs, viewpoints and processes and assisting them to strengthen community links, there is more to the issue. This section presents some of the major roles of ODL in the transformation of communities, with particular reference to the Malawian scenario.

The first role of ODL in developing communities in Malawi concerns the reduction of the national illiteracy rate. As stated in Section 1, the national literacy rate in Malawi is 64 percent. This rate is quite low compared to other countries within the SADC Region. In 2000, for instance, while the literacy rate in Malawi was 71.1 percent, it was 85.2 for South Africa, 88.3 for Botswana, 78.2 for Zambia, and 88.7 for Zimbabwe respectively. Although the government of Malawi is striving to improve the literacy situation through the free primary school education programme introduced in 1993 and adult education programmes, another great opportunity arises in the form of ODL. ODL naturally appears to be the practical solution to the conundrum that is illiteracy, taking into account the vicious circle of poverty, inadequate classrooms, lack of trained teachers and poor road infrastructure that continue to cripple literacy development efforts.

ODL would also, among other things, address the problem of low income at the household level which forces many school-going children out of school. Despite the fact that basic education is free in Malawi, parents and guardians still have to provide pocket money, buy uniforms and school shoes for their children and in some cases, provide transport fare if the school is located far from their homes. Under ODL, some of these additional expenses would automatically be avoided. Similarly, the financial demands that go with education at the

secondary and tertiary levels would considerably be reduced once ODL is well established. It also worth mention that the teaching and learning methods applied in ODL are quite compatible with adult education. Adults would not like to be in class for long periods of time being taught how to master one thing or the other; rather they would prefer to take a leading role in their own learning with the tutor only providing guidance on how best to progress in the studying process.

ODL also acts as a tool for promoting socio-cultural practices within communities. Since most adult literacy programmes adopt ODL methods of teaching and learning, it becomes easy in these programmes to build equity, inclusiveness, participation and cohesion amongst people and organisations working in their communities. In such cases, ODL provides a forum where people become socially close to discuss issues of common interest, thereby facilitating an effective way of sharing and/or transmitting important traditions and cultural values to younger generations for posterity's sake. Along the same line, ODL serves the function of changing people's mindset to abandon bad attitudinal and behavioral practices for good ones. This is so in recognition of the fact that a nation's development excels where the people exhibit strong commitment and positive attitude to issues.

Close to social cohesion is the issue of political stability and tolerance. Where people are united on the socio-cultural spectrum, political stability and tolerance flourishes. Unlike in surrounding countries such as Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo where wars and ethnic conflicts threatened their sovereign existence, Malawi has remained united and peaceful, at least, since her independence in 1964. Again, in South Africa, where the crime rate is already high, we now hear about outbreaks of xenophobic attacks.

In Zimbabwe, the ruling party has been sponsoring politically-motivated invasions of white-owned farms to 'rationalise' land ownership. The enlightenment which would result from ODL initiatives in Malawi could therefore harness the political stability and tolerance that the populace has enjoyed for the past four decades. ODL could be a conduit of crucial social information regarding democratic values and respect for human rights that is greatly needed by people in the local communities.

Research also points at the direct link between education and economic prosperity (Helpman 2004; Leslie & Brinkman 1988). The increase in literacy levels in Malawi through ODL methodologies could empower local people to improve their economic status by engaging in viable and well-informed business ventures as well as practicing the best agricultural techniques required for boosting food production. As indicated in Section 1, about 70 percent of the people in Malawi live below the poverty line. Sadly too, more than 90 percent of them live in rural areas and depend on subsistence farming for their livelihood. Although poverty takes a variety of forms, it can mainly be attributed to lack of income, lack of access to means of survival such as health, water and food, lack of means of production, and general deprivation arising out of conflicts, political differences and power imbalances. However, overall poverty is a lack of capability to take up opportunities and the absence of opportunities for one to explore one's human potential. Malawi, as a country, is blessed with an abundant reserve of natural resources which could easily be turned into tangible economic development. ODL could, thus, build capacity amongst the people to take up opportunities and uplift their own livelihoods.

The advancement of ODL in the rural sectors of Malawi could also bear some positive consequences in the area of health and sanitation. The

knowledge that would be imparted in the ODL programmes would – directly or indirectly – bring awareness to the local communities on the best practices related to health and sanitation, sexuality and nutrition. As a result, this would improve the health status of people in the country making them ready to fully participate in development programmes taking place in their communities. It goes without saying that an impoverished society, prone to disease and ill-health, can never meaningfully contribute to the development of a nation.

Furthermore, ODL stimulates infrastructural development. ODL programmes succeed where there is adequate infrastructure to support the related activities. In Malawi, for example, the MCDE has included in its plans the erection of small libraries in strategic points of the country to facilitate the distribution and access of learning resources to ODL students. Apart from serving the students in the provision of textbooks, e-learning materials and internet services, the libraries would also improve the infrastructural status of the respective local communities. Additionally, the expansion of open centres in response to the increasing demand for secondary and tertiary education would play a developmental role in the areas of electricity supply, water supply and communication, to mention but a few.

4. CHALLENGES IN USING ODL AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN MALAWI

In spite of the positive role that ODL plays in promoting community development in Malawi, there are still a number of challenges that needs to be addressed to achieve substantive development at the grassroots level.

The first challenge relates to the problem of language differences. At the meantime, there are 12 major local languages that are widely spoken in Malawi in addition to the sole official language, English. The impending Language-in-Education Policy, currently in draft form awaiting cabinet approval, plans to incorporate the 12 languages into education system as one way of liberalizing the education system in keeping with democratic values. Malawi follows the bilingual education system with Chichewa, a local language, being used as the medium of instruction from Standard 1 up to Standard 4, after which English takes over as the only language of instruction from Standard 5 on to the tertiary level. Once this policy is implemented, it would therefore be costly to develop and print studying materials in all the 12 local languages to satisfy the needs of students from different linguistic backgrounds. Worse still, all the 12 local languages except Chichewa are yet to be standardized which entails the need for more funding to carry out this important exercise.

Secondly, ODL initiatives in Malawi are hampered by a poor national economic standing. The inflation rate stood at 8.5 percent in 2009 while public debt accounted for 58 percent of the GDP in the same year. As indicated in Section 1, in 2007 over 70 percent the total population lived in poverty. With the current state of affairs, it would be difficult to develop ODL programmes to satisfactory levels. At the moment, there is also pressing need to build new infrastructure or expand existing ones in the open schools scattered across the country. Furthermore, the local people lack the financial power to pay tuition fees for their ODL study or purchase print materials, writing materials and paraffin lamps for night study, among other things. The current levels of poverty further do not allow the people to use modern ODL technologies adopted in other countries such as the use of mobile phones and the internet.

Thirdly, and connected to the issue of low economic performance, is the aspect of poor communication. The state of road infrastructure in Malawi is appalling. Although the government is doing its best to improve the situation, many places in rural areas remain inaccessible especially during the rainy season when the ground is wet. It would, thus, be difficult to distribute studying materials to these areas unless large-scale programmes are initiated to upgrade the country's road networks. Other forms of ODL communication such as mobile learning, fax services and the internet are also poor due to low socio-economic conditions.

Fourthly, Malawi's development efforts are frustrated by an unreliable and insufficient electricity supply. The country has a total of six hydro-electric stations that generate a total of 285 megawatts along the 402-kilometre long Shire River which draws from Lake Malawi. However, the country needs to raise power output to over 325 megawatts to meet rising demand as the economy grows. The current power output, with a shortfall of up to 40 megawatts, is inadequate to supply power to the rural areas of Malawi to the extent that only about 1 percent of rural households enjoy electricity supply from the national grid. This means that ODL students in the rural sector can only study during the day as they live in the dark after sunset, unless they dig deeper into their pockets to fetch paraffin lamps or candles for lighting up their homes at night.

5. CONCLUSION

Malawi, in particular the local communities, is poised to benefit quite substantially in terms of development with the advancement of ODL initiatives. The intellectual illumination that would ensue from ODL programmes could transform the lives of people in local communities in the spheres of health and sanitation, democracy and human rights, political stability and tolerance and economic prosperity, among others. ODL initiatives could also bring about much-needed infrastructural development within the communities where it is introduced. However, the success of developing local communities through ODL programmes faces a number of challenges. The major ones include the multiplicity of indigenous languages on the local scene that bear huge financial implications, poor economic conditions, poor communication infrastructure and unreliable power supply.

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