

Experiences from and impact of Open and Distance Learning in Conflict and Post-Conflict Rural Communities

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ABSTRACT

The challenges of providing educational access to those living in conflict and war-torn areas have featured prominently on a menu of problems confronting the educational sector in developing countries. Rural societies in conflict-affected areas are characterised by 'distressed livelihoods' or 'livelihoods at risks'. They face multiple vulnerabilities caused by environmental hazards, market-related risks and conflict-related uncertainties, which enhance the threshold of vulnerabilities. In many instances, conflict limits people the opportunity to participate in educational activities. Of recent however, commentators have highlighted the potential benefits of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in conflict and post-conflict societies. On the other hand, the problem, however, is that this recognition is not matched by the corresponding commitment on the part of governments to make the potential benefits of ODL a reality to those living in conflict areas who may not be able to access the conventional mode of education. This study aims to analyse the impact of ODL in conflict and post-conflict rural communities in Nigeria. Particular reference will be made to the role of the National Teachers Institute (NTI) and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in mounting up certification programmes that have significantly increased access to education, impacted the lives of the people in the communities, and enhanced their means of coping with vulnerabilities. First, the paper discusses significant issues that arise in general debates about the role played by ODL with respect to sustainability in conflict and post-conflict areas. This is followed by the institutional framework put in place by the Nigerian government in deploying ODL to marginalised communities. After which, a summary of secondary data concerning distance learners, instructional facilitators/councillors and prospective learners' perceptions about benefits of participation in the NTI and NOUN programmes will be discussed. To conclude, the paper recommends that a comprehensive framework needs to be put in place by the government in deploying accessible technologies to enable those living in marginalised communities not to be excluded from Education for All Goals.

INTRODUCTION

The achievement of the educational systems in Africa is often threatened by a series of problems including financing, lack of resource, HIV/AIDS pandemic and conflicts (UNESCO, 2001). While available literature in the area has addressed the first two factors in depth and scope, the last two, particularly conflicts has not received the attention it deserves. Equally noteworthy, with only a few exception (UNESCO, 2006a; Ambe-Uva, 2007a), educators and peace researchers in Africa have given very little attention to the potential benefits of distance education (DE) in conflict and post-conflict communities. Given the extent and number of conflicts in Africa, with all its attendant consequences, and the attention currently being paid to accelerating the educational sector response to conflict, it is surprising that few educators have tried to find ways that DE can be mobilized to realise national policies on conflict prevention, resolution and reconstruction. This is a serious gap, given that the traditional educational systems (structures) cannot affectively serve conflict and post-conflict rural communities.

This study, which is part of a larger endeavour, therefore aims to explore the potential benefits of DE in expanding educational access in conflict and emergency situations. It is hoped that the lessons learned would be relevant to Nigeria, and other countries embroiled in conflict and on the course of post-conflict reconstruction; would prompt them to renew their strategies in mobilising greater resources and commitment in the development of DE.

The first aim of this paper therefore is to examine some of the key DE initiatives been adopted in Nigeria in addressing issues relating to conflict. The second aim is to garner insights from experiences of those involved in DE that might be developed to help meet the needs of those in conflict situations.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND CONFLICT

Different scholars have attempted the definition of DE. For this study, we adopt the definition of Butcher (2000) who sees DE as “a set of teaching and learning strategies (or education methods) that can be used to overcome spatial and temporal separation between educators and learners. These strategies or methods can be integrated into any education programme and –potentially- used in any combination with any other teaching and learning strategies in the provision of education (including those strategies which demand that learners and educators be together at the same time and/or place)”.

This definition therefore enables the paper to contribute to the small but growing literature on the benefits of DE in conflict communities. UNESCO (2006a), in explaining the potency of DE in conflict and emergency situation notes that during emergencies, people may be cut off from formal schooling activities as a result of ongoing conflict and insecurity. It may therefore be appropriate to adopt DE alternatives to enable them continue learning- even if they cannot physically attend school.

DE in conflict situations is best captured by what is known as “education in emergencies”, a term used to describe a broad range of educational activities- formal and non formal- which are life-saving and life-sustaining and, therefore, critical for children, youth and their families in times of crises. Crises situations include natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and floods, as well as man-made conflicts (UNESCO, 2006b: 7). It is this relationship with conflict that this paper is concerned with.

According to Calvert (1986), DE helps extend the market for education to clientele who have not been previously served. In developing countries, this clientele has continued to increase in geometric proportion. An emerging consensus for instance shows a positive correlation between modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) with accessible delivery of DE (See Olakulehin, 2007). Equally important, in conflict and post-conflict situations, the radio has been shown to be a powerful communication and education tool provided a sufficient number of the population has functioning radios.

A study by Aderinoye and Ojokheta (2004) investigated the link between DE and sustainable development. This study shows that DE in Nigeria and throughout the continent of Africa is helping to democratise knowledge, even to those living in remote, marginalised and isolated communities. The Aderinoye and Ojokheta study also acknowledged that DE has helped individuals to acquire basic literacy and arithmetic skills, and in some instances, earn certificates in higher degrees, as well as obtain a multitude of broad brushed education skills that target whole populations (e.g., governance skills, life skills, AIDS education etc).

Examining the challenge of reaching the disadvantaged in Sri Lanka, Gunawardena (2004) identified conflict and national disasters as impeding the delivery of education, and concluded that lack of education robs a nation of a full life of its people. As noted by UNDP (2003), the educational goal is central in achieving the other goals of eradicating poverty and hunger, improving health, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing global partnerships for development.

The strengths of DE in conflict and reconstruction periods therefore include its thrust to provide educational opportunities at the secondary and tertiary levels to refugee and displaced people, as well as non-migrant nationals (UNESCO, 2006a:2). It equally allows youths and adults to “work and learn”. In addition, youths and adults who may not have opportunity to work may also benefit from DE initiatives, such as tertiary or professional training courses that may lead to future employment. While such benefits are desirable in developing countries- to reach large marginalised groups, especially where conflict has disrupted the normal life of the people - it remains to be added that there are significant obstacles to this lofty benefits. First, there is generally lack of resources, particularly funding. Since DE require large initial capital outlay, this may be problematic. Second, there is the challenge of investment in technologies such as computer network infrastructure, internet, TV and Radio transmitters, computer software and maintenance costs. Third, there is high cost

required for course material development, instructional facilitation, mentoring, continuous staff development, and learner support services.

In addition to the issue of funding is the problem of self-sustenance, as those caught up in conflict- refuges, or internally displaced students or their families may not be able to pay even modest fees. Moreover, conflicts generally cut communication systems. Therefore, even if such facilities like internet, mails, email, TV and Radio transmitters exists, they may not be possible to use.

METHODOLOGY

The processes of research were separated into two parts. The first part deals with primary research which was semi-structured interviews, and analysis of data through content analysis. The second part is document-based research which was done through a review of institutional documents.

Population and Sample Size

The population of this study consists of beneficiaries of distance education whose communities have been engaged in conflict, and practitioners in DE. The communities chosen include (i) Tiv-Jukun in the Middle Belt Region (ii) Zango-Kataf in the North-Western Region, and (iii) Ife-Modekeke in the South-Western Region. Samples of this study (N=200) were selected through non-probability sampling design of quota sampling, which is one of the major types of purposive sampling. This study is popular in qualitative research as the researcher can choose the subject to participate in the study based on identified variables under consideration.

Research Instruments

This research used semi-interviews to survey opinions about the potential benefits of DE in conflict and post-conflict rural communities. This technique was used to collect quantitative data by setting up the interview that allowed two-way communication, used both to give and receive information about respondents opinions on a particular subject (FAO, 1990). This method used a combination of interviewer experience and pre-interview planning with a fairly open framework which allowed for a methodological focus and conversation. The essence of the semi-structured interviews were to enable the researcher obtain complete and precise information (Wysocki, 2000).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this research is divided into two parts. In the first part, content analysis was used to analyse the potential benefits of DE in conflict and post-conflict rural communities. In the second part, analysis of secondary data from a review of institutional documents, i.e., documentary-based analysis was used, to support specific objectives, in order to analyse primary data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Demographic Characteristics

There were 171 male respondents and 29 female respondents. Respondents' involvements with DE were from different backgrounds as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents

| To whom Administered | Number | Percentage |
|---|--------|------------|
| DE Practitioners (Facilitators, Student Councillors, Faculty) | 35 | 17.5 |
| Students Offering DE Programmes | 68 | 34 |
| Graduates of DE Programmes | 97 | 48.5 |
| Total Sample | 200 | 100 |

Potential Benefits of DE in Conflict and Post-Conflict Rural Communities

Distance education has come to be identified with greater flexibility in the delivery of education, empowerment, openness in access, cost effectiveness, and a myriad of programmes related to sustainable outcomes that enable learners to apply what they have learned at the spot, since their environment becomes their laboratory (Ambe-Uva, 2007a). It equally allows education to break out of the iron triangle that has constrained learning time immemorial, i.e., the vectors of access, cost and quality. To judge the satisfactorily level of the respondents on how DE may help in conflict and post-conflict rural communities, the researcher used a five point scale designed to measure the following variables (i) Access (ii) Empowerment (iii) Related Programmes (iv) Cost-Effectiveness and (v) Course Material Delivery. The aggregated result obtained can be summarised in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2: Satisfaction levels of the respondents regarding the potential benefits of DE in conflict and post-conflict rural communities

| Potential benefit level of DE \ Sex | Highly Beneficial | Beneficial | Indifferent | Not Beneficial | Highly non-beneficial | Total |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Male | 33 (19.3%) | 89 (52%) | 24 (14%) | 16 (9.4%) | 09 (5.3%) | 171 (85.5%) |
| Female | 07 (24.1%) | 14 (48.3%) | 03 (10.3%) | 5 (17.2%) | - | 29 (14.5) |
| Total | 40 (20%) | 103 (51.5%) | 27 (13.5%) | 21 (10.5%) | 09 (4.5%) | 200 |

Table 2 shows that 52% respondents were satisfied and 21% were dissatisfied while 27% were indifferent, 33% were highly satisfied and the remaining 4.5% were highly dissatisfied. The study also found out other important features, which were:

- i. 58.5 % of the respondents regarded DE as beneficial to providing ACCESS to those marginalized in conflict rural communities; 19.5% were indifferent while the remaining 22% did not consider DE as beneficial. Most women argued that henceforth, it was not necessary for them to travel kilometers away to attend classes as they could conveniently do it within their homes, and only occasionally travel for tutorials and examinations.
- ii. 61.8% regarded DE as an important avenue for EMPOWERING those in market related vulnerabilities, skills acquisition and knowledge about human rights, good governance, conflict resolution and HIV/AIDS education. While 17.2% were indifferent, only 21% did not consider DE as a medium in empowering those in conflict and post-conflict rural communities. This benefit was seen especially in the area of computer literacy, handset repair skills, and small scale business. A lady who said her husband was late, argued that the skills she has acquired during her training in Bee keeping has helped her family re-integrate into the market economy, which has since enhanced her family status.
- iii. A total of 53% of the respondents replied that DE had programmes related to PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION. Such programmes identified were Teacher Education, Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, HIV/AIDS Education and Management, Agricultural Extension, Environmental Resource Management, Small Scale Business Enterprise Management, among others. While 28% were indifferent, 29% opined that DE programmes were not of much benefit to conflict and post-conflict rural communities.
- iv. The majority of the respondents (61%) mentioned that the COST involved in completing DE programmes was low; 23% were indifferent whereas 16% opined that it as expensive.
- v. 48% of the respondents mentioned that the quality of COURSE MATERIAL was up to the mark. However, opposite opinions were put forward by the respondents regarding the timely delivery of the course materials. While 28% were indifferent, 24% expressed

their dissatisfaction to this matter. At the same time, they also mentioned that the irregularity/delay in delivering the course materials was minimising day by day.

CONCLUSION

The World Education Forum, held in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000 recognised that the Education For All (EFA) targets will not be met unless education systems in conflict and in disaster affected contexts are given specific attention. UNESCO (2006b) has shown that “fragile states”- many of which are crises or post-conflict states- are now a focus for policy development of donours, United Nations and other agencies. Aware that reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - especially those relating to education- in fragile states is highly challenging, donours are developing policy guidelines for alternative forms and approaches to service delivery in such countries.

While rapid urbanization is sweeping the world over, available data shows that approximately three billion people in developing countries, and half of the people of the world, live in rural areas. It is within this ambit that this paper explores the potential benefit of DE in conflict and post-conflict rural societies. The task of reaching such communities can not be a “business as usual” approach. It will demand reaching more than thousand subsistence farmers, nomads, pastoralists, and petty traders who have been “by-passed” by the conventional education systems due to conflict. The DE approach, linked to the specific needs of rural communities for skills acquisition and capacity development will enable the marginalised to seize economic opportunities, improve their livelihood and enhance their quality of life.

As the data above shows, more than 71.5% of the respondents consider DE as a veritable tool for reaching those in conflict situations, and only 15% disagrees with assertion. The remaining 13.5%, who are indifferent may only lead us to conclude that they are not aware of the benefits of DE. It is in recognition of this fact that the University of Peace held its third Curriculum Development Workshop for the Western African region in Abuja, Nigeria from the 8th to 12th of March, 2004, co-hosted with and coordinated by the National Universities Commission of Nigeria (NUC) and the University of Jos, Nigeria. The Workshop was aimed among other things to enhance the development and integration of course modules on peace and conflict studies into existing curricula of the 54 Nigerian Universities through the general studies course within the framework of the National Universities Commission (NUC); To develop a Youth Peace Education and Conflict Prevention Curriculum for implementation in the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) conflict prevention centres, and to expand and disseminate both the integration of course modules programme and Youth Peace Education and Conflict Prevention Curriculum into other Africa Centres. It has been shown that in conflict-affected contexts, the inclusion of peace education and conflict resolution programmes should support peace processes at different levels and contribute towards more peaceful futures (UNESCO, 2006b).

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has taking the bull by the horn by introducing programmes in peace studies and conflict resolution from Bachelor to Masters Degree level. These programmes are delivered via a mix of technologies including print, CD’s, VCD’s, and other multimedia facilities. This is supplemented by an elaborate student support services. Plans are also in place to introduce the A-Tutor, an e-learning platform to facilitate education delivery. Specifically, these programmes whose clientele cut across rural communities have the objectives of enabling learners to:

- i. acquire specific context of the sources, causes and processes of conflict;
- ii. acquire basic understanding of various approaches to conflict mapping and conflict analysis;
- iii. identify with various methods of conflict management;
- iv. demonstrate basic understanding and competent skills in evaluating and interpreting conflict situations.

- v. analyse the basic concepts, theories, themes and issues in peace studies and conflict resolutions.

An earlier initiative from the National Teachers Institute (NTI), has witnessed the integration of peace studies curriculum in its programmes to ensure that trained teachers are placed in a better position to contribute to the process of educating for peace, in conflict, and during post-conflict reconstruction to enhance sustainable outcomes.

As interesting as these initiatives are, we conclude with a caveat here that, adopting this mode of education delivery to reach the rural and marginalised will demand more than rhetoric. It will require political will, commitment and involvement of the communities affected by conflict. The need for enhancing funding cannot be ruled out, especially at the initial stage, to enable such DE delivery to be entrenched. Luckily, as NOUN embarks on an extensive geographical reach and penetration, it is hoped that the potential benefits of DE in conflict societies would be reaped. However, there is an urgent call for the government to deploy accessible technologies to enable those living in marginalised communities not to be excluded from Education for All Goals.

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