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Let Them in! Can ICT Address the Equity Challenge in Africa?

Issue at-hand

Issues of educational ineffectiveness and inefficiencies are still real in Africa. In spite of statistical discrepancies between sources of data (UNESCO, World Bank, etc.), it is estimated that on average access to both lower and upper secondary education in low income African countries is very low (44.7 and 23.2% respectively). Moreover, the completion rates for both levels are very worrisome as only 29.5% and 13.9% of those accessing the lower and upper secondary level respectively complete them. There is also the issue of those who complete both levels but who are lost to the system as they do not access the subsequent level. At the lower level, there is 6% missing at the enrollment at the upper level and of the 13.9% who complete the upper level, only 6.1 % access higher education. This could be attributed to issues of inadequate provision of enrolment opportunities and those of relative poverty of a great number of families who cannot afford the fees for higher education.   There is also a huge urban and rural divide. Urban students access and complete both lower and upper secondary education at a much higher rate than their rural counterparts.

One of the key promises of ICTs in education is to provide an avenue for addressing educational inequities in terms of access to quality and relevant learning opportunities. Indeed, the capacity of ICTs to break down barriers to education is now proven and well-established. Issues of accessibility such as distance and affordability are now slowly being resolved thanks to the ubiquity of ICTs and internet connectivity across the world. In Africa, however, inequities are still very hard to break due to a plethora of conditions that prevent a significant number of youth to access life-changing opportunities such as secondary and tertiary education. School dropouts are not only the victims of the ineffectiveness and inefficiencies of education systems but also of

the inability of governments to expand the supply of affordable secondary and tertiary education opportunities.

Policy Recommendation: Enabling Social Enterprises and the Private Sector to Provide Low-income Individuals and Disadvantaged Youth with Opportunities to Participate in the Economy through Jobs, ICT Training and Access to Education.

In a case study presented by Ng'weno and Wamukoya at the AVU's 2015 International Conference entitled *"The role of ICT in creating access to education: A case study of Digital Divide Data (DDD)",* an experiment by a social enterprise to support low-income individuals and disadvantaged youth overcome the challenges of poverty to access higher education through employment, ICT training and access to education is examined.

Digital Divide Data (DDD), a young social enterprise established in 2011 in Kenya, has pioneered a business process service delivery model that provides quality and cost at parity with traditional for-profit companies. The particularity of DDD as described by Ng'weno and Wamukoya is that "*it recruits disadvantaged youth who are recent high school graduates and have achieved the average grades to join university but are not able to pursue higher education due to financial difficulties. These recruits participate in DDD's computer training for 3-6 months before they start working as operators on client projects. The training equips them with ICT skills and enables them to deliver services such as data entry, digitization, document conversion and web research. In addition, DDD partners with a university where operators can take classes at the digital school. During their tertiary education, DDD employees can simultaneously take classes, work as operators at DDD, and continue specialized DDD training. Tertiary education is paid for through a combination of scholarships from DDD, salary from work at DDD, and loans".*

In order to measure the effectiveness of such an approach to address a specific inequity in Kenya, the authors set out to explore the role of ICTs in facilitating access to higher education by disadvantaged, yet talented and able, youth through a creative approach to empowerment through training, jobs and partnerships.

In terms of findings and lessons learned, Ng'weno and Wamukoya underscore the following:

- ICTs could have a multiplier effect throughout the education system by enabling access to education for disadvantaged youth by facilitating the acquisition of skills and gaining of knowledge that adds value to learning and teaching.
- Lack of access to ICTs for disadvantaged groups is a major challenge to realizing the advantages of ICTs, as it limits access to many social and economic benefits.

- ICTs play a significant role in empowering disadvantaged groups through training and eLearning. Given an opportunity and the right tools, disadvantaged individuals can use ICTs to their benefit, in particular in a work-study environment.
- Access to and use of ICT not only provides skills in basic technological competence, but also improves employability of users.

Recommendations

Africa's solutions to both the low enrolments in tertiary education (under 10% and the lowest in the world) as well as to the massive unemployment of its young people lies in creative approaches to the use of ICTs and eLearning at all levels. DDD's experiment has identified key areas where African governments need to act:

- Creating a supportive legal and regulatory environment for the development of Public-Private-Partnerships (PPPs) to entice private sector actors to finance education

- The expansion of higher education through ODeL is both an equity and relevance issue. African governments and their partners (private sector, technical and funding agencies) should provide more enrollment opportunities for the increasing number of completers of secondary education in Africa.

  Stepping up the use of ICTs at secondary level could be a game changer in terms of quality teaching and access to learning materials in the perspective of lifelong learning.

References

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