Equalizing Access to and Quality of Basic Education: Can ODeL Deliver in Rural Areas?

Issue at-hand

In most developing countries, and more particularly in Africa, easy access to schools and quality education are not equally distributed geographically. Depending on whether a child or young adult lives in rural or urban settlements, her or his chance to easily access schools and learn valuable knowledge and skills differs; with the scale tipping in favor of the urban centers. This rural-urban divide in equal opportunities to access readily available schools in one’s neighborhood and which provide quality learning as a result of having good teachers and sufficient learning materials, has been subject to multiple policy decisions and experimentations (Glennerster, Kremer, Mbiti and Takavarasha, 2011). Alas, the gap still persists and is exacerbated by many factors, including the inability of governments to generate enough financial resources and human resources to provide infrastructure and trained teachers in all confines of large countries. However, with the advent of ICTs and ODeL one can begin to dream of solving this difficult equation.

Policy Recommendation: (i) provide communication and connectivity infrastructure in rural areas; (ii) equip rural schools with technologies such as computers, TV sets and video and train teachers in the use of e-learning; (iii) initiate/strengthen sensitization campaigns in rural areas on the benefits of good education to stimulate demand for good education

India has embarked on a major policy drive to digitize its rural areas in all social and economic aspects of life: Health, agriculture, land reforms, etc. In the State of Gujarat for example, a project called Gyan Gangaat has been launched and aims at providing information, connectivity,
education, e-health and e-governance. The Indian state is not the only provider of these projects. It works closely with the private sector which invests in projects geared towards bridging the rural-urban gap by bringing the benefits of the ICT revolution to rural and remote areas. For example, in a public-private partnership scheme, India is successfully providing mobile telephony to its rural populations through the *Village Public Telephones* (VPTs) projects.

In education, the Indian government has initiated the digitization of rural education centers to address the issues of quality, overcrowding and retention within government schools in rural areas. These schools represent 85% of all government schools in the country. Some of the challenges faced by Indian rural schools are similar to the ones faced by African rural schools: lack of teaching staff and motivation among them; lack of sufficient number of schools to cover every village, leading to dropout among students due to distance and costs. Girls are very often the victims of this situation as parents prefer to send boys to school and leave the girls behind; and lack of teaching and learning materials.

The digitization of rural education centers has introduced a total paradigm shift in educational management and delivery in India. In terms of admission, schools have now online platforms for admitting students and collecting fees. The digitization of management has now made it easy for school administrators and teachers to record and keep track of information pertaining to their students. The use of mobile phones to pay school fees has curtailed corruption and embezzlement.

Teachers on the other hand are undergoing training in the use of technologies such as computers, video projectors, ODeL pedagogy and Open Educational Resources (OERs).

With regard to infrastructure, the Indian government is transforming its rural schools into smart schools. There is now a new concept of classrooms called *smart classrooms*. These classrooms are equipped with computers and large TV screen. The students do not have necessarily a laptop or tablet as a few African countries have provided, but the delivery and content of the education have improved significantly. For instance, Thakur (2017) indicated that the pieces of equipment “are being installed for proper understanding of the subjects. It is helping the students in understanding the subjects because it is very easy to show pictures and videos of the topic which is being taught. Take example of any subject, teachers can show more pictures of the topic to be taught than available in the textbook for better understanding e.g. for social science teachers can show the pictures of different places, for General Knowledge, pictures of different players, responsible persons, famous politicians and celebrities can be shown”.
**Recommendations**

Africa can tremendously benefit from systematic campaigns to address the urban-rural divide in terms of equalizing access to educational opportunities through the ICTs and ODeL. The political will to embark on such a revolution exists only in a few countries on the continent. Therefore, there is need to:

- Engage with policy-makers and advocate for a campaign to equalize the chances of rural children and adults to compete with those in the urban areas on equal footing.
- Governments should invest massively in building the ICT infrastructure throughout the rural areas so as to create the conditions for their use for education, health and governance purposes.
- The private sector, and more particularly the mobile phone industry, can be a willing partner in this endeavor as it is in their interest to multiply by two or three the number of their subscribers.
- It is also important to integrate ICT and ODeL in pre-service and in-service teacher training. A new type of teacher, a 21st century one, is needed and should be deployed in the rural areas of Africa.

**References**


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Thakur, Manisha (2017). Digitisation of Rural Education Centers in India.  
http://blog.onfees.com/digitisation-rural-education-centres/

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