

Chapter 7

CREATING A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY THROUGH DISTANCE AND OPEN LEARNING IN CAMEROON

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Introduction

Revolutions and revelations in development theory within the last decade or so have shown that the majority of the development programs which focus on economic growth and improvement of the Gross National Product (GNP), consistently by-pass a very important segment of the population in developing countries. This group consists of the rural and urban poor, for whom education is crucial if they are to participate effectively in making the decisions that affect their lives (Tchakoa and Nji, 1998; Burkey, 1993; Chambers et al., 1990; Nji, 1979, 1981; Coombs et al., 1973; Coombs and Ahmed, 1974; 1975; Axinn 1976; Niehoff and Neff, 1977).

Within the last two decades (1980-1999), a new and equally deprived group joined the ranks of the destitute and disenfranchised the urban and new poor (Nji, 1994; World Bank, 1995). Yet, since the 1970s, the attention of development planners, decision-makers and specialists are being drawn to the merits of distance education as an effective strategy to increase wider access to educational opportunities and to satisfy the variety of educational needs of learners, particularly adults (Verduin and Clark 1991:4). Learning by adults falls in three categories:

- i) *adult basic education*, which refers to the teaching of adults according to any organized formal or informal plan of education... with the ultimate goal of helping adults better their occupational opportunities and quality of life;
- ii) *career education* involves helping adults to prepare for a vocation or profession or to upgrade their job-related skills. This type of distance education tends to have the largest number of students because of its goal-appeal. Often, working and unemployed adults must enroll in courses continuously or recurrently because of the ever-increasing pace of change in the job market and the need for new skills. People out of work seek retraining to enable them fit into a job market in constant flux. As Verduin and Clark (1991:7) have noted, most proprietary education at a distance, and much of the post-secondary distance study that takes place through colleges and universities, is undertaken by adults to prepare for, upgrade, or change careers,
- iii) *Leisure and enrichment education*, is the type of adult education that seeks to provide adults learning experiences that enable them to achieve the highest point in the legendary Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, Self-actualization. Self-actualization or self-fulfillment is achievable when well-tailored educational programmes enrich the lives of participating students as well as those with whom they interact. This takes place through the development of both self-esteem and a sense of well-being. A good number of adult learners studying at home would take a course merely for personal interest or self-improvement. Many senior citizens fall in this group of learners at a distance.

The benefits to the learner

The flexibility of timing makes distance learning especially attractive for people who otherwise cannot obtain the desired knowledge or acquire needed skills through on-campus instruction. Fortunately, numerous agencies and organizations now offer distance education using various media and state-of-the-art technologies. These include night and day classes, week-end programmes, with greater use of tele-

computer conferencing, internet and even traditional classroom situations.

ODL shares much in common with *nonformal education*, broadly described as *a method of assessing the needs and interests of adults and out-of-school youth*, Coombs et al, (1973); Niehoff and Neff (1997). In their view, nonformal education plays a crucial role in developing countries because it provides opportunities for communicating with both the young and adult learners, motivating them to participate in development projects, helping them to acquire skills and *adopt behavioural patterns which could lead to increased productivity and improvements in living standards*.

Yet, experience with rural development in Africa within the last three decades demonstrates that formal school programs have bypassed the needs of the rural poor, perhaps because most of the education programs were founded on a much narrower conception of development. Very often, they reflect a rather narrow vision of the problems because of the professional biases and self interests of programme designers, policy-makers and politicians.

Consequently, education for rural development, which theoretically concentrated training efforts on adults, sought to use conventional methods most suitable for education of the youth with very little concern for quality, relevance and the efficiency of the programmes.

However, successful rural development requires integration between sector programmes and multidimensional analysis and interventions. For example, the successful transformation of rural communities will depend on careful and concerted efforts on the part of specialists in agriculture, small industry and commerce, transportation and irrigation, health, nutrition, and other aspects of human activity including co-operatives and community development.

This implies that successful rural development programs must tap the advantages provided by innovative and alternative educational approaches such as ODL. These benefits cover all aspects of living and take into consideration the needs of deprived, marginalized peoples and populations with special needs.

Stressing the ubiquity of Nonformal Education, Niehoff (1977) reiterates that where there is concern with basic human problems, good Nonformal Education will be found. I argue on this score that similarly, development programmes that encourage ODL are likely to cover the basic needs of the poor and other socially disadvantaged groups in society who do not benefit as they should from conventional education programmes. These groups include women, the handicapped, subsistence cultivators, school drop-outs, unemployed graduate, working mothers and busy professionals who desire to up-grade their skills.

Social scientists have continued to express concern over the failure of the formal educational system, particularly its inability to take into account the contextual issues involved in social change and development and their corresponding impact on resource allocation and the alternation of the opportunity structure of many people.

If African countries adopt ODL as a key component in poverty alleviation strategies, they will be able to improve, up-grade and disseminate new skills at lower costs with greater multiplier effects for many people and in areas needed by learners

What went wrong with on-campus instruction?

A major criticism of residential instruction is its *rigidity*: Fixed and rigid formal rules of access and exit, registration procedures and above all its lack of flexibility to adapt to changing needs and circumstances. On campus studies are *location-specific*. As such, they do not offer the time flexibility that comes with

distance learning. Students are subjected to blanket, structured standards with regular time-tables. This makes it difficult for working adults to *learn while they earn* as the slogan of the Distance Education Programme at the University of Dschang says.

The absence of *relevance* is another indictment against on-campus instruction. On-campus curricula in Africa have tended to perpetuate the absorption of classical concepts and procedures that are generally incompatible with the socio-cultural environments and social realities of learners. This is due in part to heavy dependence on textbooks, educational technology, processes and development standards developed in the advanced countries.

Needs Assessment and the Distance Education Programmes at Dschang

Since ODL programmes are demand-driven, problem-oriented and learner-centred, their success depends on a proper needs assessment before the design stage and careful monitoring during implementation. Audience targeting helps to achieve the goals of ODL. This is why the first step in the design of the Distance Education Programme (DEP) at the University of Dschang was to conduct a nationwide survey of potential students to determine who they are, where they are, what they do, what courses they would be interested in by order of preference, how and who will pay for them, their access to various technology, income and educational levels etc.

The 1991 study enabled the distance education team to achieve this goal. Through a participatory research approach, potential students could inform the project initiators about gaps in their education, their availability, their social and economic circumstances and environmental constraints. The Needs Assessment Study was carried out by Cameroonian scientists who themselves were later to plan and design the curriculum for certificates and diplomas in Tropical Agriculture by distance from the University of Dschang.

The content of each of the 20 courses on the programme have wide applicability to other African countries. Practical exercises and mail-in assignments are designed with relevance in mind, as well as utility and applicability as indicators to measure the quality and relevance of the programme. One student who is currently enrolled in the programme wrote, after taking two courses: prior to taking your applied rural sociology course, I had taken a course from a British University in rural sociology but it is not anything compared to the course offered in Dschang. In her words, the Applied Rural Sociology course from DEP Dschang is more relevant, has more meaning and contains more practical examples that I can understand and see everyday than the one I took from Britain (personal communication).

Another student who had taken another course from our Programme was able to get the author of one of the courses on the Programme to make major corrections to a graph in the course, because the model answer she received for a mail-in assignment was different from the one supplied by the teacher. When the student wrote to the Programme Coordinator about the discrepancy, the Coordinator got another teacher in the discipline to cross check the student's complaint. Indeed, the student was right. This is one example where distance education can enable students to participate in improving the quality and relevance of their education, particularly if such education responds to their felt-needs.

Issues in distance education for human progress in Africa

Distance Learning is being proposed here as an effective strategy for capacity building and human resource development. A strategy that can be achieved at reduced costs to accelerate the process of human progress and sustainable development on the African continent. The capacity of the process to achieve its desired and stated goals is subject to the resolution of four major issues. These include, how to:

- * spread educational opportunities so as to meet the basic needs of the majority of the youths and adults in rural and urban areas;
- * improve the quality and effectiveness of existing and future educational programmes vis-a-vis the national development priorities of African countries;
- * effectively integrate and coordinate residential instruction with learning at a distance;
- * make distance education sustainable in African countries.

In an illuminating discussion, Roling (1988), examined the relationship between technology, which he referred to as Technical Innovation (TI), and man, or what might be roughly equated to his Human Resource Development (HRD). Using outreach in agriculture and rural development as the background for his analysis, Roling (1988: 13) maintained that most of the world's extension workers and agencies are engaged in TI, in which extension is seen as an instrument for increasing the efficiency of production. HRD on the contrary focuses not on developing natural resources through people, but on rural people themselves and on the social system in which they function.

The emphasis of the analysis in this chapter is on people as actors and the ultimate beneficiaries of all development efforts. In Africa, we must put particular emphasis on the role and future of the farmer because of the key functions that agriculture fulfills in our societies as: a) the greatest employer of labour; b) the greatest source of raw materials for development, and c) the largest provider of goods that earn foreign exchange for emerging nations.

Another area of emphasis should be on the high rate of unemployment among high school and university graduates as well as drop-outs. These persons cannot find jobs either because of dysfunctional educational standards, negating personal characteristics or mitigating social and economic forces in African economies.

The primary role of distance education should be to improve the quality and efficiency of human capital taking into account the unique social, cultural political and economic system in which people operate. The importance of the human factor in agricultural extension has also been emphasized by Garforth (1987) who suggested that the roots of inequities and lack of opportunity in agricultural extension ought to be traced to:

- * poor access to extension services by small and poor farmers;
- * promotion of inappropriate technologies;
- * unequal distribution of power within rural societies, and
- * prevalence of a crippling value system of the dominant class in each society.

Education in Africa suffers from poor access, lack of pertinence, inequalities and dominant elitist value systems. While this discourse agrees with the line of thought advanced by Roling (1988) and Garforth (1987), it goes further to proffer that conventional strategies to bring about desired changes among the poor are not sufficient basis for hope in the 21st Century. In addition, emphasis must shift from technology transfer for growth, to technology development, innovation, acquisition and utilization for people-centred development (Nji, 1992). In this way, through participatory technology development (PTD), educational strategies in African can become more relevant, problem-centred, environmentally sound and culturally relevant for overall human progress.

The Echoes from Cameroon

Interestingly and happily for development scientists, policy-makers in Africa are beginning to awaken to the call for consideration of the human factor in development. Recently, the Minister of Higher Education in Cameroon, Mr. Jean Marie Atangana Mebara declared in his opening remarks at a meeting with

University lecturers in Dschang in November 1998 that the most precious resource that any nation should learn to manage well is human resources. Any nation that does not do that is doomed.

In other pronouncements, Mr. Atangana Mebara has been up-beat about the prospects that distance education has for Cameroon's higher education future. He remarked that: distance education is the road into the future of effective broad-based education in higher education in Cameroon. We must multiply the Dschang experience because we can no longer afford to build large lecture halls on campus.

On another occasion marking the Convocation Ceremony at the University of Buea Mr. Atangana Mebara (1999:7) stated that looking at higher education more globally, we must realize that Higher Education in the 21st Century will be more competitive, more complex and more comprehensive. Our ability to cope with the challenges depends on the preparedness of our institutions to compete in the global system of higher education. He exhorted the Vice Chancellor of the University to explore ways and means of introducing distance education at the University of Buea because open learning and continuous education are central to some of the changes that we are now advocating in the Ministry, (Mebara, 1999:12). A dual mode of education delivery (residential and distance) will increase access to higher education while reducing pressure on increasingly limited fiscal and physical resources in Higher Education Institutions nation-wide.

The positive response to distance education from Cameroonian policy-makers and politicians is coming 12 years after the pioneer distance education project in the country was started at the University of Dschang. A project that came in, not through the traditional door of government initiative, but through the backdoor of stubborn, no nonsense go-getter behaviour and innovativeness of individuals within the system.

As a matter of fact, four lecturers from the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Dschang became frustrated by an elitist system of admission by entrance examination to the 5 year agricultural training programme. Each year, approximately 5,000 candidates would sit for the exam but only 100 would be accepted because of limited space and government planning.

As Dschang is the only national institution for agricultural training and education at the tertiary level, at least 4,900 disappointed individuals who would have liked to study agriculture are denied access through of government policy. This creates an elite class of agriculturalists since all of them were automatically absorbed into the Cameroon Public Service.

The DEP was a quiet revolution to combat legitimate denial of access. The four lecturers who wrote the project proposal applied to CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) for funding. Approval for the project was received through competitive bidding which saw 11 out of 119 projects selected for funding that year. The main objective of the five year project (1991-1996) was to develop a Two-Year FTE (Full Time Equivalent) diploma programme in Tropical Agriculture by distance at the University of Dschang.

After the needs assessment study that ended in late 1991, the programme initiators expanded membership to a core team of 12 lecturers who then planned, designed and implemented a 20 course curriculum leading to the award of certificates and diplomas in three options: *Animal Production, Crop Production, and Agricultural Enterprise Management*. The Programme which was officially inaugurated by the Permanent secretary in the Ministry of Higher Education on April 30, 1996 now has 238 students. A total of 950 course booklets have been sold at the price of US\$30 a course.

Programme Design

The experience from Dschang has confirmed generally accepted empirical evidence that the conceptual and structural issues surrounding distance education cannot be resolved in a hurry. What is needed is foresight on the part of project initiators and managers, *and commitment and political will* to get the initiative going on a sustainable basis by politicians and policy-makers. Also, participation by beneficiaries at all levels of the programme from design to evaluation is crucial to guarantee success, relevance and quality.

Mr. Atangana Mebara's declarations and policy statements are indicative of a new trend in Cameroonian Higher Education thought portraying a dim light at the end of the higher education tunnel in Cameroon. It is important that public policy be backed by concrete actions if we are to tame one of Africa's most perpetual and stubborn animals: poverty.

Once a collaborative relationship has been established between all the actors concerned by, and interested in the process, a number of factors have to be taken into consideration for the implementation of effective distance education programmes in Africa. These considerations include, but are not limited to:

Structural Reforms

Access to educational opportunities in Africa is persistently biased in favour of cities and towns with easy access. Teachers prefer to work in cities than in village schools; and educational technology tends to be less available in remote villages where school children are taught the duties of a policeman even though they have never seen one. The primary consideration in the effective development and promotion of distance learning should be to reduce structural inequalities between urban and rural schools. In Cameroon, the programme at the University of Dschang became the first official functional distance education programme in Cameroon, particularly since the 1993 Reform in Cameroon's higher education system.

Focus

Taking cognizance of the biases of existing formal education programmes and how they limit opportunities and dwarf the needs of learners, special effort should be made to focus programmes on the most seriously neglected groups (Coombs, 1973), such as women and young people. Some of them might be unable to go to school full time because of work-related and family constraints, while others may be unable to pay the high cost of full-time university education. Others still may be drop-outs who now need special skills in specific work-related areas to make up for lost opportunity (Nji 1985).

For example, it is estimated that only 51% of the world's male youth ages 10-24 (41% for females) were enrolled in secondary school in 1996. In Cameroon, the enrollment rate in 1980 was 24% for male and 13% for female. Ten years later in 1990, the secondary school enrollment ratio increased only slightly to 28% for male and almost doubled to 23% for female youth ages 10-24 (World Bank, 1995:190-191).

However, less than 25% of all higher education enrollments in Cameroon are female. The DEP at Dschang is targeting women, young agriculturalists, agricultural technicians, and people on the fringe. So far, 15% of currently enrolled DEP students are female.

Problems of limited infrastructure and financial resources cannot meet up with the rapidly expanding population in Cameroon's higher education system. From a University student population of 213 in 1961, the number jumped to 3,334 in 1971, to 10,676 in 1981, and more than quadrupled to 39,181 in 1991. These numbers jumped to 59,287 in 1998 and increased by 18% to 70,000 students in the current academic year (Sanyal, 1999:11). It is important to note that these increases have not been matched by expected

corresponding increases in infrastructure. On the contrary, on-campus resources have deteriorated and funding to higher education severely cut as a result of serious economic crisis.

These data indicate that critical population groups are likely to be left out of the conventional educational stream unless innovation takes place in education to increase wider access by the majority to life-long learning opportunities. Distance education offers planners and policy makers the opportunity to focus educational programmes to groups and regions with the greatest needs.

Content

For all human beings, the satisfaction of biological needs is a prerequisite to human progress. Development literature is replete with comments and analyses showing that the most chronic problems in developing countries is the inability of the majority of their citizens to live full and fulfilling lives as a result of widespread poverty, ignorance and disease.

Therefore, in the design of distance education programmes care must be taken to build programme contents provide learning opportunities for capacity building in the satisfaction of basic needs for food, shelter, clothing and health. Along with these goals is the need to build survival strategies and coping mechanisms through education on topic areas such as work, family, the formation of a civil society and mutual interdependence.

The DEP in Dschang tried to integrate these concerns and awareness in its design. The courses being offered allow students the flexibility to select *required courses* and *electives* from the following list of 20 courses: Animal Nutrition and Pastures; Food Technology; Pig Production; Cattle, Sheep and Goat Production; Poultry and Rabbits Production; Perennial Crops; Food Crops; Vegetable Crops; Applied Soil Science; Crop Protection; Irrigation and Drainage; Crop Processing and Storage; Agricultural Extension; Applied Rural Sociology; Agricultural Economics; Agricultural Credit and Finance; Farm Management; Agricultural Marketing; Project Analysis and Agro-forestry.

Programme Integration

Distance education should be integrated and coordinated with formal on-campus programmes to avoid duplication of effort and waste of resources. Careful integration will maximize educational opportunities and widen the options available to learners.

The establishment of institutional linkages between distance learning centres and on-campus programmes will greatly enhance teaching effectiveness, and also promote programme relevance for individual fulfillment and national development. Genuine efforts in programme integration will increase opportunities for social and cultural values to be included in educational programmes that are demand-driven and needs-specific.

In the programme at Dschang, students can acquire skills from single courses, combine a number of courses towards a certificate, or complete a number of certificates towards a diploma. Students who successfully earn a diploma may continue their studies in the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Dschang in Year 3 of a 5-Year Agricultural Training Programme.

Selection at this level is by a special entrance examination. The diploma curriculum is designed to correspond to the first two years of the 5-year degree-level programme. By allowing entry into Year 3, students are able to maintain continuity in their studies without loss of time.

Appropriate Media and Technology

The choice of appropriate media and technology is crucial for the success and sustainability of distance education programmes. The appropriateness of the technology and delivery media from the point of view of technical effectiveness and affordability should determine technology choice so that the technology may meet the needs of a wide variety of end-users with a broad range of prospects, perspectives and problems.

Also important is the timing of distance education programmes with careful consideration for *flexibility and adaptability*. Where full time personnel and full-fledged programmes are not yet available, it appears desirable that opportunities be created for delivery of services even on a part-time basis with partial programmes that presently fulfill the needs of learners. The ultimate goal should be to improve the quality of life of learners through the selection of appropriate media and technology that enhance knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and application.

In view of the fact that developing countries are at a technological disadvantage, care must be taken in the choice of technology for delivery of distance learning programmes. Media selection must ensure that not only should the message be relevant from an individual as well as from an institutional perspective, the technologies used should be available and compatible with the socio-cultural context and circumstances of the learners (Nji, 1992). The primary means of instructional delivery for the programme in Dschang is print materials. The material for each course is consolidated in a course booklet which incorporates self study questions and exercises. Students request mail-in assignments when they are ready, and each course has 2-3 assignments.

The needs assessment survey conducted in 1992 showed that less than 5% of the respondents had access to video equipment although about 50% owned tape-recorders. Telephone and internet are for all of them, sheer dreams. We, therefore, designed the course material with these facts in mind in response to the expectations and the study environment of the students.

Flexibility is built into the programme by having an open entry and exit policy. Students register when they are ready and discontinue from the programme when they feel compelled to do so. However, to guarantee the quality of the programme, three main principles apply:

1. All course authors are required to change their mail-in assignments once a year;
2. Two sessions of practicals and final exams are conducted on the main campus in Dschang in March and August each year;
3. The courses are offered in English and French, the two official languages of Cameroon.

Distance Education, Faculty/Staff Training and Rural Development

The success of development programmes depends on three key factors: personnel, non-human resources and environmental conditions. Central to the environment is government *action and commitment* to people-centred and production-oriented development. Commitment is also expected to be demonstrated by an unselfish and unbiased allocation of resources for distance education and open learning programmes. Perhaps more important in this triangle of factors is the human component because even if commitment is forthcoming from the political leadership, and resources made available, a dedicated, well trained corps of professionals and paraprofessionals is needed if distance education is to bring about the desired impacts. Well trained and dedicated staff are necessary for distance education programmes in development countries because:

- * distance learning tends to involve adults who have developed considerable independent thinking with

- a clear idea of their goals in life;
- * distance education methodology requires skills that are much different from the face-to-face situation in on-campus programmes;
 - * of the persistent difficulties of urban trained technicians to adapt to rural situations;
 - * the low level of technology, infrastructure, communication facilities and information in farming communities and structurally depressed areas preclude the use of new Information and Communication Technologies;
 - * an unfavourable reward system for people working in rural areas diminishes learning opportunities for many people;
 - * high rates of unemployment and low incomes in many African countries contribute to lower rates and levels of education;
 - * structural inequalities create dependencies that are incompatible with high achievement rates in education;
 - * the chronic problems of low educational attainment in rural schools and a corresponding low level of capacity building in African countries, itself reinforced by persistent poverty, all conspire to deny many people the opportunity to participate in making the decisions that affect their lives.

In the light of the increasing restructuring of the world economy, African countries can avoid being left behind by intensifying their efforts in the creation of knowledge societies in the 21st Century. The training and recruitment of competent personnel at all levels and in all sectors of the economy, their retention and professional development through life-long learning opportunities are necessary conditions for the survival of all nations states in this century.

As Stiglitz (1999:1) has said, "globalization is like a giant wave that can either capsize nations or carry them forward on its crest..." In its analysis of the World Development Report 1999/2000, the World Bank (1999:1) remarks that all nations must master :

two forces of change in the 21st century: the integration of the world economy and the increasing demand for self government which will affect responses to key issues such as poverty reduction, climate change, water scarcity.

To cope with these forces, all nations must adopt a rich menu of rules and policies that can serve as the ingredients of a comprehensive approach to participatory approaches to raising living standards (World Bank, 1999:1). Open and Distance Learning contains the ingredients for the rich menu that African countries need to fight the chronic and obstinate barriers to change: poverty, widespread ignorance, low participation of the population in making the decisions that affect their lives, and the absence of a collective conscience.

Appropriate Communication Skills

A major weakness of agricultural extension in developing countries is the lack of appropriate communication skills. Distance education can play a critical role in developing communication skills and enhancing capacity building at the grassroots (IGNOU, n.d.). New and appropriate skills, useful relationships and positive attitudes to change can be developed through learner-centered approaches that can best be promoted through open and distance learning.

The implications of these analyses are that a distance education programme in agricultural training and education as the one at the University of Dschang, needs to be well focused, well managed, well

coordinated and made responsive to the needs of learners within a broader context of a national educational policy. This also implies that university administrators will be required to shirk off old attitudes and behaviours such as proclivity to old-fashioned and out-dated methods of student recruitment, classroom instruction and student assessment. There is need in today's educator to be more dynamic, more forward-looking, and more receptive to the continuous changes in our environment.

In developing countries the government is still the largest and most influential development agency. All government policies concerning the lives and work of farmers are translated into action through bureaucracies whether these policies relate to land, dissemination of new technologies, delivery of services or the collection of taxes of various kinds.

In spite of the long experience of most governments in these activities, there are only a few instances where such efforts have really benefited the poor (Nji, 1992; 1985). Development efforts in this connection have been slowed down because education has not been given its pride of place in human resource development. And as a result of long-standing illiteracy in African countries, politicians and policy-makers continue to make decisions from the centre, in complete disregard of the needs, experiences and aspirations of the majority of the population, most of them poor. But as Tchakoa and Nji (1999) have pointed out, targeting the poor can be an effective strategy to alleviate poverty in Africa.

National efforts to train and retain distance educators can contribute toward poverty reduction and increase democratization of education in Africa. This will lead to fuller participation of the majority of the population in decision-making processes and enable the society to tap latent untapped human and natural resources.

Training is needed for rural development paraprofessionals on such topics as health, child welfare, nutrition, agricultural production, income generation, the involvement of women in development activities, gender issues, participation, and the effects of globalisation on African societies. Open learning and distance education has the promise, opportunity and potential to release the energies necessary to provide such training.

Through increased access to education and by adequately addressing the issues of relevance, accountability can be obtained from politicians and bureaucrats. In order to win the fight against corruption (Elshorst,2000) and globalization (Nji, 1998), African countries must mobilize the necessary resources, open up minds, create opportunities for dialogue and constructive criticisms and build an enabling environment for their citizens to participate in nation building. Once again the potential of open and distance learning to help African countries to face these challenges are enormous.

The distance education educators in Dschang received training in Canada and Cameroon on key areas of capacity building including course development, student recruitment, marketing, project administration and management, technical editing and the production of audio-visual materials.

One of the unique characteristics of the project is that there was never Canadian presence on the ground in Cameroon. The management was left in the hands of a project management team whose coordinator was elected by his peers and only ratified by the University administration. Canada provided financial support and technical assistance through short-term training in Canada and in Cameroon during a total of 5 short visits ranging from 2-6 weeks between 1991 and 1998.

Problems

Problems surfaced on the project ranging from institutional stone-walling, blackmail and jealousy by

peers, outright sabotage and passive resistance to collaborate on the part of some core members. Some authors did not respect deadlines; in some cases they openly attacked the project coordinator for being too meticulous and scrupulous in his management. However, along the road were roadblocks and roses, a typical blend of what characterizes humanity: conflict and consensus.

Governments that integrate both on-campus and distance education in its training programmes will contribute positively to reducing the number of illiterates in the developing world, and guarantee a more informed human resource base at the grassroots. In Cameroon for example, although the adult female literacy rate was 64.4 in 1985, it dropped to 57.4% in 1990 against a public expenditure of 7.5% of GDP in 1985 (World Bank, 1995:190). Yet, as Korten and Alfonso (1983:30) noted, education is a critical ingredient of development which in itself is a process that is highly charged with power, commitment, and leadership.

Appropriate Policies

Policies are the most visible ways by which the impact of governments is felt by the poor, particularly peasants, rural residents and those living in depressed urban areas. Unfortunately, these groups of citizens are often those by-passed by government programmes to alleviate poverty. As result of this neglect and the implementation of policies that by-pass the persons for whom they are intended, most governments are negatively evaluated by their populations. Another source of conflict between the government and the governed is tax policies that are too often not people-friendly; that are seen to be irrational and tend to negate productivity.

Not surprisingly then, it is often the tax problem that upsets even illiterate and the so-called ignorant farmers (Nji, 1981) in poor countries. During one of my research trips to a remote village in Cameroon in the heat of the democratic struggle in 1990, I asked a 50-year old farmer what kind of government he would prefer. He shot back as if he was waiting for the question: "A government that will not impose too many taxes at the same time on the same people."

Open and distance learning in developing countries are in dire and urgent need of appropriate policy instruments to reinforce and sustain current proven achievements in distance learning. Policies are needed to set up the academic equivalence of certificates and diplomas awarded to distance learners. Teachers and staff involved in course development and programme administration are often left in the cold without any written policy on how faculty time and efforts will be rewarded. These gaps need to be filled by appropriate people-friendly education policies.

The cost of distance education in developing countries is high, and access still difficult for many. The media and technology is often muffled by unnecessary bureaucratic red-tape and extreme degrees of conservatism. Some of these obstacles can be removed by granting distance learning students tax rebates on course materials and establishing preferential postal, telephone and fax tariffs for distance learners and distance education centres.

Governments in developing countries can rebuild tarnished images and reestablish much needed trust by instituting policies that will reinforce indigenous knowledge, enhance the development of local capabilities for coping with rapid social change, and create development. The best and most rewarding of such policies are those that relate to human resources development because investing in people is the best investment against irreversible trends in globalization and the best guarantor of continuity for any human society.

The effectiveness of public policies depends on the degree to which they are compatible with the culture

and goals of the persons for whom the policies have been designed. In the context of this paper, distance education learners are the beneficiaries or receivers of distance education policies. They should constitute the primary target of all distance education programmes.

The second group are the policy-makers or those we might want to consider as the providers or facilitators of an enabling policy environment for distance education to take root and thrive. What links the two groups together is a shared distance education environment characterized by an acceptable system of values representing a synergy of individual and collective value systems.

The two independent units (L and P) are expected to work together to achieve a harmonized whole. The ultimate goal of this interaction should be to achieve a system fit whereby the *values* characterized by the needs, expectations, motives and sentiments of distance education learners mesh with the goals and objectives of the policy-makers. The larger the intersection, the greater the integration and fit between the two groups.

As individuals, all distance learners have self esteem. They seek to develop and maintain an identity as well as strive for self-fulfillment. As an institution or organization, the bureaucracy which is made up of policy-makers, seeks to achieve specific goals. Synergy in the distance education environment is achieved when the two groups achieve maximum interaction and share a common system of educational values.

The effectiveness of distance education programmes ultimately affects the entire educational system as well as the other sectors of the economy such as the agricultural system. However, since distance education and open learning is only one of the methods or approaches to human development, the effectiveness of the distance education system will depend on the performance and goals of all its components within the educational environment of each society. This is further determined by **the** importance attached to distance education as well as the flexibility with which Open and Distance Learning programmes are conceived and administered in different environments.

Therefore, there is need for careful planning and curriculum development. Also of importance is the need to cultivate a culture of individual and collective accountability on the part of all the actors, and responsiveness on the part of the institutions responsible for Open Learning and Distance Education.

Finally, mechanisms must be built into the system of distance education so that the needs and aspirations of learners are recognized; the learners motivated and rewarded for sustainable personal and social development. Viewed in the same way as educational extension, the sustainability of distance education programmes will be determined by the same factors that make a good agricultural extension programme tick: adaptability, quality, access, flexibility and relevance (Peabody, 1968; Nji, 1998b).

Conclusion

Distance education should not be seen as a panacea for solving the educational needs of a nation in short supply of resources. Rather, it should be seen as a window of opportunity for a nation to maximize the use of limited physical, financial and human resources in its efforts to increase educational access while guaranteeing the quality.

In poor nations, distance education is a viable alternative mode of educational delivery for adult learners, farmers, school drop-outs and people with special needs and problems. Distance education can reinforce the indigenous knowledge systems of peasants in developing countries, and help governments to remove the barriers to progress that keep poor people poor: the burden and barriers imposed by ignorance, disease, managerial incompetence, and lack of access to new technologies.

The high cost of campus-based instruction, the stress created by inappropriate and inadequate infrastructure in the schools, the constraints of work and family all preclude the ability of individuals to seek further education within formal residential-type instruction systems.

Traditional methods of formal education have been less successful in minimizing the risk factor in peasant agriculture for instance and less effective in creating a well informed environment for the adoption of new technologies. Distance education offers the potential and opportunity for nations and individuals to correct these inequities and brighten the future of adult learners, particularly the poor and persons living and working in areas of limited opportunity structure.

ODL methodology takes into consideration critical aspects of culture that are indispensable for human progress such as family life, farming systems, cultural values and beliefs. Distance Learning enables development agencies to build upon existing institutions and minimize wastes of resources.

In Africa, the methodology can build upon the traditional solidarity of peasant societies, their aspirations and their vision of the world as often translated in the oral traditions of communities left behind in the process of rapid social change. Also, ODL, rather than call for new investments in infrastructure, tends to maximize the use of existing resources.

Most often, difficulty lies in where and how to start a distance education programme. With the advent of modern Communication and Information Technologies the decisions of late starters in distance education have been greatly facilitated as institutions can be contacted and information shared more easily and at a much cheaper cost than a couple of decades ago.

Perhaps the greatest ingredients needed for late adopters of the distance education technology are *courage*, *determination* and above all a *vision* of the future within the framework of the overall educational objectives and development goals of each nation. The recent behaviours of the new leaders in Cameroon's higher education system exemplify this awareness and consciousness of the necessity to adopt visionary and strategic planning in higher education (Sanyal,1999).

Distance Education holds Africa's hope as a viable mechanism to build knowledge societies, enhance democracy, encourage good governance, promote citizen participation in public activities, build a culture of civic responsibility and prepare the continent for the formidable challenges of the 21st century.

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