Abstract for a Workshop Introduction on Distance and Open Learning for Adult Basic and Non-Formal Education in Africa

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Why is Open Learning Failing the Masses of Africa?

1. Introduction

The title of this paper is to some extent a rhetorical question. It reflects the rhetorical rather than scientific or academic purpose of the paper. It is given not so much to find provable answers as to stimulate the emotional and professional concern of educators attending this forum and to seek action on the problem it sets out to highlight.

Open and distance learning almost certainly, either in tandem or separately, represents the most dramatic development in education, especially in developing countries, in the second half of the twentieth century: the phrase has become one of the leading catch-phrases in the educational jargon of our time. In the last decade it has been joined by information and communication technology and such phrases as the new Information Super-Highway; in fact in some circles it has been superceded by or even absorbed into ICT. The latter seems set to remain the educational 'flavour-of-the-month' for many of the months of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

We must set against that apparent educational success story the rather dismal failures to achieve the Jomtien slogan of 1990, 'Education for All by the year 2000'. In reviews prepared for the Dakar Conference in 2000, which reviewed the achievements towards EFA, some dramatic statistics emerged: it was predicted that by 2000 there were about 125 million children worldwide and 50 million in sub-Saharan Africa not in school; the number in Africa was set to rise to about 55 million by 2015; it was similarly predicted that in 2000 there were 875 million adults who were illiterate with probably at least 200 million of these in Africa. This figure was also set to grow as more children who had not been to school became adults by 2015.

To what extent, if at all, have the successes of open and distance learning been targeted at the failures of EFA? This paper, which explores the somewhat gloomy answer to that question, draws heavily on an earlier paper I prepared for the International Extension College commissioned by COL and UNESCO as one of many background papers in preparation for the Dakar Conference. (Dodds 1999)

2. Progress and failures in the development of adult basic and non-formal education

The phrase non-formal education , which was invented in the 1960s and 1970s by Coombs and Ahmed and Sheffield and Diejomaoh, is beginning to go out of fashion especially in Southern Africa. For my purposes here, however, it complements the

phrase adult basic education by drawing attention to the adult learning that always has and always will go on about life-related needs rather than fixed school or out-of-school curriculum including literacy and numeracy.

For a brief time in the early post-independence period of many developing countries, especially in the late seventies in Africa, the importance of adult literacy, non-formal education and other forms of adult basic education seemed to be being realised by governments and even international agencies as essential pre-requisites for economic, political and social development. Ministries or departments within ministries were created with the specific task of co-ordinating the diversity of educational activities that makes up adult education in most countries. The worldwide economic recession, which hit Africa especially with disastrous social effects in the mid 1980s, drove adult and non-formal education back to the Cinderella status it has usually enjoyed in most countries at most times. The pressure to use what limited resources there were for education on maintaining the formal schools and universities meant that there were very limited resources for adult education: what there were tended to come from the non-governmental sector.

Sadly it seems to me that this low esteem and level of attention is still reflected in the discussions and resolutions that went into the Dakar Conference and have emerged from it in terms of the almost exclusive emphasis on providing for the 55 million places short-fall and the little more than lip-service about the need to do something serious about the adult education short-fall of nearly 900 million. The continuing shortage of resources for education are perhaps mainly to blame but they are aggravated by the continuing international economic pressures on governments of developing countries to restrict public expenditure and to privatise the costs of education.

The position is summed up in a quote from a paper also prepared as part of the lead-up to Dakar by Catherine Odora-Hoppers (Odora-Hoppers 1999):
> '…the area of adult learning continues to face problems of recognition. In government departments the political will to provide the mandate required for adults and communities to receive competency enhancement appears low. Instead of matching pronouncements with action, resources are often earmarked specifically only for that aspect of basic education carried out in the classrooms of formal schools. In the hard world of practice moreover schooling is a priority but adult learning is voluntary.'

3. The rise and rise of open learning at-a-distance

By contrast with adult and non-formal education, open and distance learning have continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s and across the turn of the centuries to experience the phenomenal growth they started in the 1970s. This growth has been at many different levels, in many kinds of education and in most parts of the world. During the mid to late nineties, moreover, recognition for the respectability and acceptability of open and distance learning has finally begun to arrive. There is talk, and to some extent reality, of its incorporation into the educational mainstream in many countries, especially in the industrialised world and in Asia, though less as yet in Africa.

Much of the improvement in its status undoubtedly results from its successful incorporation into tertiary education structures so that now a significant proportion of all tertiary learners worldwide are doing so at least in part by distance education methods. This incorporates its use in vocational education and training, especially though not exclusively teacher education. Its popularity with industrial concerns, partly because it allows lifelong learning to take place for employees with the minimum loss of working hours, contributes to this growing recognition.

Distance education's most prolific and well-known ancestor, correspondence education, started in several countries by offering opportunities to students out-of-school to continue with their secondary education. Out-of-school secondary education continues to be a very significant component of distance education in many countries. It takes two forms. In countries where there is a long tradition of universal and compulsory schooling up to secondary level, as in most industrialised countries, distance education offers a second chance to obtain or improve qualifications to those who for one reason or another did not do so successfully when they were at school. In many developing countries where a high proportion of the population do not get the chance to go to or to complete their secondary schooling in the normal and formal way, distance education is often used to provide an alternative route to secondary qualifications, both at junior secondary and at senior secondary level. This is regularly the only route for a large number of out-of-school youth. India's National Open School is one of the outstanding examples of this pattern and there are many examples in Africa, such as in Botswana, Zambia, Malawi and Namibia.

Open and distance learning has not been used heavily to date for basic education either for school-age children or for adults, though there seems to be a growing interest, possibly arising from the EFA short-fall at basic school level for children already noted, in its applicability for out-of-school children. It will be interesting to compute the percentage of contributions to this conference on basic education compared to that for those on tertiary or vocation education. For a forthcoming publication of occasional papers from the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) it has proved impossible to get more than one out of ten of the contributions on adult basic education. I am sure that a similar dearth would be found in a bibliographical review of recent publications on open or distance education.

The purpose of this paper and of the workshop, which it is intended to introduce, is to argue that this neglect is not justified.

4. Open learning at-a-distance for adult basic education in Africa: the story so far

Africa has a long history of using the media of mass communication and distance education for non-formal education. By the late sixties there were a variety of experimental projects using radio and simple printed materials for agricultural, health and community/civics education for adults, often for adults with little or no formal schooling. In 1964 Ghana, and in 1966 Zambia, followed the Canadian and Indian model of Radio Farm (or Rural) Forums, which were later followed in several other Anglophone countries. Also in the sixties several Francophone countries in West Africa introduced a parallel but different model, the Clubs Radiophoniques (or radio clubs). In a few countries, such as Cote d'Ivoire and Niger, Teleclubs were introduced

for non-formal education on the back of the much-publicised though short-lived school television programmes. These on the whole did not survive the demise of the much larger school programmes. In Tanzania in 1966 a small experimental series of radio campaigns was introduced which by the early seventies had turned into very large-scale projects reaching up to three or four million adults at a time and had been copied in Botswana and later still in Zambia. All these models, while incorporating minor variations in approach, used the same basic methodology of regular educational radio programmes accompanied by simple printed materials, studied in organised listening groups and involving some form of regular organised feedback.

In 1962 an organisation was set up in Abidjan, INADES, to experiment with the use of simple printed correspondence courses combined with regular face-to-face discussions for rural and in particular, agricultural education. This programme spread to many of the countries of Francophone West Africa by the end of the decade and thereafter to several other East African countries. Finally, Ghana, from the early fifties through the seventies, exemplifies attempts to harness the huge popularity of films, brought through mobile cinema vans to rural areas, to popular education.

In a study of 73 projects world-wide of non-formal education using distance education carried out for the Commonwealth of Learning (Dodds 1996), 31 of the examples came from Africa (43%). The aspects where African programmes differed from the general world-wide trends were as follows. First an even higher proportion follow a non-formal curriculum and therefore significantly less a school equivalency curriculum (only 20% compared to 41%). A somewhat higher percentage overall include social and economic topics in their curriculum, with larger minorities including topics on running your own business and paraprofessional training (36% compared to 23% and 26% compared to 15% respectively). As regards media, the results are much the same with a lower percentage of African projects using TV or video-cassettes than elsewhere. Also a slightly lower proportion include face-to-face contact sessions than the general. Probably the biggest difference relates to organisational responsibility, with government departments taking more responsibility, along with parastatals (32% compared to 19% and 16% compared to 11% respectively) while broadcasting stations take the lead much less frequently (3% compared to 29%).

The overall conclusions of that Dodds report (1996) were that there was a lot of evidence, in Africa and elsewhere, that distance education methods were being used extensively, though usually not intensively, to carry out non-formal and adult basic education. They were, moreover, being used with significant technical success. However, there was a serious dearth of carefully researched evidence about what worked best, in what circumstances and what were the constraints holding back the much wider and larger-scale use of such methods to help to meet the Education for All targets as they referred to adult basic education. In particular it concluded that there was little evidence that governments were prepared to invest significant resources in such programmes so as to allow them to grow to a scale where their impact was socially noticeable and where they could begin to realise the economies of scale which are a significant and proven characteristic of distance education at other levels.

Since then a major study has been carried out and published by COL edited by Professor Richard Siaciwena entitled <u>Case-Studies of Non-Formal Education by Distance and Open Learning</u> (Siaciwena 2000), which details five projects in different African countries where these methodologies have been used successfully, in several cases over a significant period of time. More recently still an important pilot project has been carried out in North Central Namibia, which has attempted to learn from these previous experiences and is the subject of a thorough action research study by Ms. H.Nekongo-Nielsen. A personal communication from Ms. Nekongo-Nielsen indicates that the Ministry of Agriculture in Namibia is taking the apparently successful outcome of that pilot project of using affordable media as part of a farmer education programme seriously as a possible model for a much extended programme.

From all these experiences as well as from similar reports from India in particular and from Latin America, I believe that there are two overwhelming conclusions that can be drawn. The first is that it can be done: we have the technology and are rapidly getting access to new technologies that will increase our capacity to provide learning opportunities to adults in developing countries that can enhance their quality of life. This is dramatically illustrated in the Siaciwena case-studies. At the same time such projects can open up further education possibilities for their learners if we are able to exercise the political will to make these opportunities available. The second is that we have been remarkably unsuccessful to date in persuading our political masters that these opportunities are worth investing resources in at levels sufficient to make serious inroads into the educational deprivation of adults on a sufficiently large scale as to make an impact on overall national development indices. A third conclusion relates to both of the previous points. Our technical ability to reach undereducated adults with information, knowledge and skills that can make significant changes in their lives can be dramatically improved if we can harness the new technologies to that purpose. Instant access to vital agricultural information about market prices or animal or crop disease prevention measures, for example, or to health and social information which can increase peoples ability to avoid the threat of HIV/AIDS or cope more effectively with its devastating impact when it does strike a family or a community could be incorporated into more traditional adult education programmes. In this way such information could usefully be made available on a much wider scale than it is at present, if computer access points or tele-centres, could be set up in remote rural areas in developing countries. At present such access is extremely scarce.

5. So what can and must we do about it?

The answers to this question are the subject of the discussions which I hope will follow this introductory paper. Let me end, however, by quoting from the earlier paper (Dodds 1999) about what might lie ahead for the use of open learning through distance education in the twenty-first century and raisng some questions to start us off on the discussions.

'At the end of the day it comes back to… political will. The media and methods are there. ..It is possible to provide a much more extensive provision of adult basic and life-related non-formal education for a very significant proportion of Africa's undereducated adults using the media and methods of open and distance learning at costs that are affordable if governments and the international community really take the task as a high priority task for the next two decades. The decision about such

priorities and the provision of the necessary resources is a matter of international political will.

So what does the twenty-first century hold for the field of open and distance learning for adult basic and non-formal education? The optimistic scenario, to which this author subscribes, is one in which at last educationists and politicians recognise the absolute necessity to address the problem of the continuing need for effective adult education programmes to realise full national and international economic potential and national and international peace and stability which could result from it. In doing so they will also recognise the potential for the wide use of open and distance learning for adult basic education. In fact the absolute necessity to harness these media and approaches to this problem will become obvious. Under that scenario the following themes and issues will come to the fore:

- The need to organise non-formal education and adult basic education in ways that continue to address the immediate life-related learning objectives of the target audiences at the same time as giving the learners the educational tools to allow them to continue to learn on their own
- The consequent blurring of the divisions between formal education and non-formal education
- The gradual incorporation of ever more effective and accessible information and communication technology as that technology is put within the reach of rural adults throughout Africa; to achieve this governments and international businesses will have to be led to agree on ways of improving the communications infrastructure which are mutually beneficial, not only in terms of financial profit.

The pessimistic scenario is that these somewhat idealistic realisations will not come about and we will be left with much the same half-hearted use of the tools at our disposal with continuing limited effects. The end result will be the total failure to bring about education for all or for the majority of Africa's adults within the next century and the continuing growth of adult illiteracy. The economic results of such neglect are too awful to contemplate.'

The following questions are suggested as the basis for the workshop discussion, which, I hope, will now follow:

- Is the analysis outlined in this paper right?
- If so, why?
- What can we do about it now?
- What are the roles for ODL institutions in turning the tide?
- What are the roles of ODL professionals in turning the tide?
- What are the roles of educational administrators in turning the tide?
- What can and must we expect from our politicians to turn the tide?
- Can it be done?
- Is there a place for an African Foundation of Open Learning for Adult Basic and Literacy Education (AFOLDABLE)?
- If so, who'll join up?

References:

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T.Dodds 1996 <u>The Use of Distance education for Non-formal Education</u> COL/IEC Cambridge and Vancouver

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