Enhancement of Learning for Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Through Information and Communication Technologies in Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

There is need to transform education in Africa even among the orphanaged and vulnerable children (OVC) in order to become more competitive and competent in a globalizing society through e-learning. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used to enhance learning activities as the instruments of change and the tools of liberation for OVC. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) coupled with application of appropriate ICTs can play a central role in the delivery of education to all levels and provide OVC a chance for a bright future. This paper therefore discusses the concepts of ICTs and ODL and the utilization of ICTs in Open and Distance Learning. Finally, it discusses the enhancement of learning for OVC through ICTs in Open and Distance Learning.

INTRODUCTION

In Africa education has not played a positive role as it does in developed countries. It is clear that Nigeria as well the rest of Africa, does not have adequate infrastructure to accommodate all the children in schools. In an effort to meet to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), goal number 2, many developing nations allocate more resources to building schools in order to expand the opportunities for education. This challenge was largely caused by the continents history of colonialism and colonial education systems which prepared indigenous people for a limited number of societal roles. Thus, HIV and AIDS have just added to the already gray background. In Nigeria, 60% of the total population were youths of which 20% of all children are below 19 years were orphans. Of these 4% were maternal orphans, 11% were paternal and 5% were double orphans (Esugwo 2009). Therefore, achieving the MDGs will require concerted effort by expansion of learning to the unreached out of school going age.

Education provides the best strategy to break the cycle of poverty, HIV and AIDS, misery and violence. Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world and a weapon to fight against HIV and AIDS. Thus, education is a social vaccine. However, traditional methods of education and training cannot address the scope and scale of the task. Therefore, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized other areas of human life and the world. ICTs can be utilized to teach all subjects on the Nigeria school curriculum and utilized to teach any child including children with special educational needs.

Lessothos (2010) operational definition of orphans and vulnerable children is as follow: An orphan is any person who is below the age of 18, who has lost one or both parents due to death. A vulnerable child is any person who is below the age of 18, who has one or both parents who have deserted or neglected him/her to the extent that she / he has no means of survival and as such is exposed to dangers of abuse, exploitation and / or criminalization and is, therefore, in need of care and protection.

There is need to transform education in Africa even among the orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC) in order to become more competitive and competent in a globalizing society through e- learning. ICTs can be used in learning activities as the instruments of change and the tools of liberation for OVC. ODL coupled with application of appropriate ICTs can play a central role in the delivery of education to all levels and provide OVC a chance for bright future. This paper therefore discusses the concepts of ICTs and ODL and the utilization of ICTs in ODL. Finally, it discusses the enhancement of learning for OVC through ICTs in Open and Distance Learning.

The Concepts of ICT and Open and Distance Learning

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is an electronic based technology generally used to collect, store, process and package information and technology as well as provide access to knowledge Laudon and Laudon (2010). Also, it includes various technologies and their applications, such as the use of computer, micro-electronic devices, satellite and communication technology.

According to Tandon Nidhi (2008) ICTs are commonly used to refer to the converging modern day techniques of phones, wireless and internet. ICTs in rural context however, must also include traditional technologies such as radio, satellite radio and television. Overtime, we expect these distinctions to blur as the technologies converge further.

The three defining characteristics of modern age ICTs are their convergence, their speed and increasingly, their comparatively low operating costs. These characteristics offer a broad range of possibilities for information collection, manipulation, transfer and transmission, storage and presentation, which can be effectively applied in rural contexts. As technologies and software improve and their diffusion spreads, ICTs offer urban and rural populations new ways of networking and communicating.'

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) on the other hand refers to a process of providing access to learning with the learner for removed in space and time from the learning provider. The learners/students depend largely on the distance learning facilities and the institution for progress and successful completion of their programme.Open learning or education refers to the flexibility of and access to instruction by the distance education mode in order to ensure that the broad availability of educational opportunities reach as many segments of the population as possible.

The term distance learning, according to Garrison (2011), grew out of the need for a concept wider than correspondence study that could encompass new communication technology for the delivery of education. Although the term has become widely accepted, it has some inherent constraints as to its exact meaning and scope. Every attempt to define distance learning/education refers to the separation of teacher and student as well as other illuminative perspectives.

The use of ICTs in Open and Distance Learning

The use and efficacy of ODL as a viable alternative for developing the human resources in developed and developing countries have become common place. Globally, the explosion in the use of ODL has been due partially to the rapid advancement in computer and telecommunication technologies, which allows access to materials by learners in different parts of the world anytime, anywhere and by the most appropriate means.

The development of ICTs worldwide has not been driven by the need of education. However, education is a potential user of technologies developed, mainly for business and entertainment. There is a misperception in the

general society that the use of ICTs has only emerged in Open and Distance education as recently as few years ago. The development in computing and telecommunication infrastructures continues to improve and become quite affordable to greater majority of the people in the developed part of the world. Yet, history tells us that the use of postal technology, print technology, radio and television at the different times they emerged in ODL was considered 'cutting edge' technologies. The same goes now for the computer and the use of internet for teaching in distance education.

In recent times, the use of modern ICTs in education has been glamorized due to many reasons, including globalization, knowledge explosion and development in telecommunication, communication and computing. As a result, the use of modern ICTs has become a bandwagon or a seductive influence.As opined by Fonatine (2009), if technology is used simply to automate traditional models of teaching and learning, it will have very little impact. Indeed, as we speak, there is a ranging debate about the final outcome of education with or without the use of technologies. Some research studies have shown that the use of ICTs does not enhance achievement; it only assists in the provision of an enabling environment for learning.

In the final analysis, technology just means a tool, an aid to assist us with what we are doing. It is not an answer but a means to an answer. It is a servant to help a master accomplish what would otherwise have become a difficult task.

Enhancement of Learning for Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC) through ICTs in Open and Distance Learning.

This section deals with how ICTs is of assistance /help to OVC.

Providing ICTs to OVC will create many learning opportunities and improve their ways of life. It will allow OVC to participate in a rapidly changing world in which work and other activities are centered on accessing it. Global state: "ICTs have been identified by many international development institutions as a crucial element in developing the world poorest countries, by integrating them into the global economy and making global market more accessible."

ICTs tools can be used to find, explore, analyze, exchange and present information responsibility and without discriminating against OVC.

ICTs can be employed to give OVC quick access to ideas and experience from a wide range of people, communities and cultures. The diffusion of ICTs within societies is varied with, some instructions and sections of society having greater access to ICTs than others. This gap is known as the digital divide. Association for progressive communication state: "Despite these imbalances in power relations, many social justice movements believe ICTs can be used to promote equality and empower marginalized groups. These groups suggest ICTs as a means of providing accessible and affordable information and a platform for voices that might otherwise go unheard."

ICTs will enrich the learning of OVC who cannot afford to be in school. OVC will be able to follow the course material on their own and at their own pace by using ICTs. The teachers can use cheap mobile cell phone in the delivery of lessons to OVC. The m-learning will be the easiest for OVC since half of the world's population either own their own mobile cell phones or has access to one. ICTs should be developed for OVC learners and outreach linkages. There is need for the government to establish rural community resource centers (CRCs) where workstations will be established. In these CRCs there should be solar internet cafe where there will be mobile cell phones, personal computers and laptops for OVC. However, quality versus quantity should be taken into account as ODL providers develop materials for OVC learners.

The ICTs are potentially more open and affordable for schools, universities, private institutions or even by individuals, to own and operate. They can control the process according to their own needs and wants for better controlled outcome and quality.

In addition, ICTs also give a measure of protection against HIV and AIDS, particularly girls. If OVC are to benefit from ICTs interventions while recognizing the negative impact HIV and AIDS had has on them; two strategies should be undertaken:

1. Extending financial or technical assistance to OVC to facilitate access and control of ICTs by providing training to staff and ICTs education like in developed countries.

2. Establishing of rural CRCs for out of school children.

Conclusion and recommendations

As ODL gets into the mainstream of education in national development and ICTs are being integrated into education, nations must strive to get the maximum benefit to open up access, save cost and massify education. However, this entails that it should be efficiently and effectively done by providing ICTs to OVC that will create many learning opportunities and improve their way of life. If the OVC needs are met in the area of ICTs they will move along with other children in that area and be part of the digital 21st century.

Recommendations

1. There should be sensitization on the use of ICTs based on the best practices from other countries. Ministry of Education (MOE) should network for ODL with other institutions offering e-learning to the vulnerable groups and women in order to learn and collaborate. The advantages of learning by ICTs will develop interest among OVC.

2. For OVC in rural setting where there is no internet connectivity, information should be put on CD-ROMs and DVDs. This will enhance learning among OVC. They will not benefit in the early stages due to non internet connectivity though they should also be part of ICT development.

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