

DISTANCE LEARNING INTERVENTION IN UNSERVICED RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE NIGER DELTA OF NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta produces the oil wealth that accounts for the bulk of Nigeria's foreign earnings, but it paradoxically suffers pervasive local poverty. The problem of poverty in the midst of ballooning oil revenues amongst other issues has spawned discontent and disillusion and created the restiveness for which the region is now known World-wide.

The Niger Delta has a humid, semi-hot equatorial climate and due to heavy and frequent rainfalls, soils consisting mainly of silt and clay become saturated, reducing infiltration to the barest minimum and encouraging run-off, making it more expensive to construct sustainable infrastructure; physical (e.g., roads, canals and bridges); social (e.g., health and educational facilities, and public utilities); and institutional (e.g., credit institutions and postal services).

The terrain is difficult, debilitating while the effects of prolonged and reckless exploitation of natural resources has massively polluted the environment. Given the fact that the mangrove swamp zone is a massive swamp with scattered islands, population is sparsely distributed making the task of promoting sustainable human development infrastructure which usually involves large capital outlays and great elements of risk harder.

It is our view that distances learning can be used as a delivery vehicle in the absence of access, to intervene in the education of the people of the region. The Programme can also serve as a delivery vehicle for information into the remote areas of the Niger Delta targeted towards Peace Building, Conflict Resolution, Poverty Alleviation, Capacity Building, Health Issues, Modern Farming Methods and other appropriate educational information.

INTRODUCTION

In order to achieve even marginal success with the Millennium development goals, innovative and radical ways will have to be found for delivering development to people in remote areas of developing nations, like the people of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. The MDGs, which are based on analytic work and consultation that started in the mid-1990s, are intended to be shared statement of global aspirations for improvements in human welfare, tied to concrete indicators to be achieved by 2015 or earlier. How can the international community reach the global goal of universal primary education by 2015?

Some schools of thoughts have advocated that real development lie in freedom (Amartya Sen 1989, 1992, John Daniel, 2005), defining development simply as the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. The Millennium Development Goals state these freedoms implicitly. The condition for developing these freedoms is a massive increase in human learning because there is a link between learning and development and by and large the more that the citizens of a country have learned, the more developed that country is (John Daniel, 2005). People need to learn across a broad front and the categories: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to live together serve to define that breadth. The condition for

developing those freedoms is a massive increase in human learning. Thus people, firms and Countries use knowledge to improve their capabilities and efficiencies in the production of goods and services. Sometimes they create such knowledge themselves; at other times they adopt knowledge created by others. Education is the key to creating, adapting and spreading knowledge. Basic education increases people's capacity to learn and to interpret information while higher education is needed to build a labour force that can keep up with a constant stream of advances, which compress product cycles and speed up the depreciation of human capital. In recognizing these benefits, many countries have made great strides in expanding enrollment at all levels of education, and a good number have made primary and even secondary education universally free (World Bank, 1999).

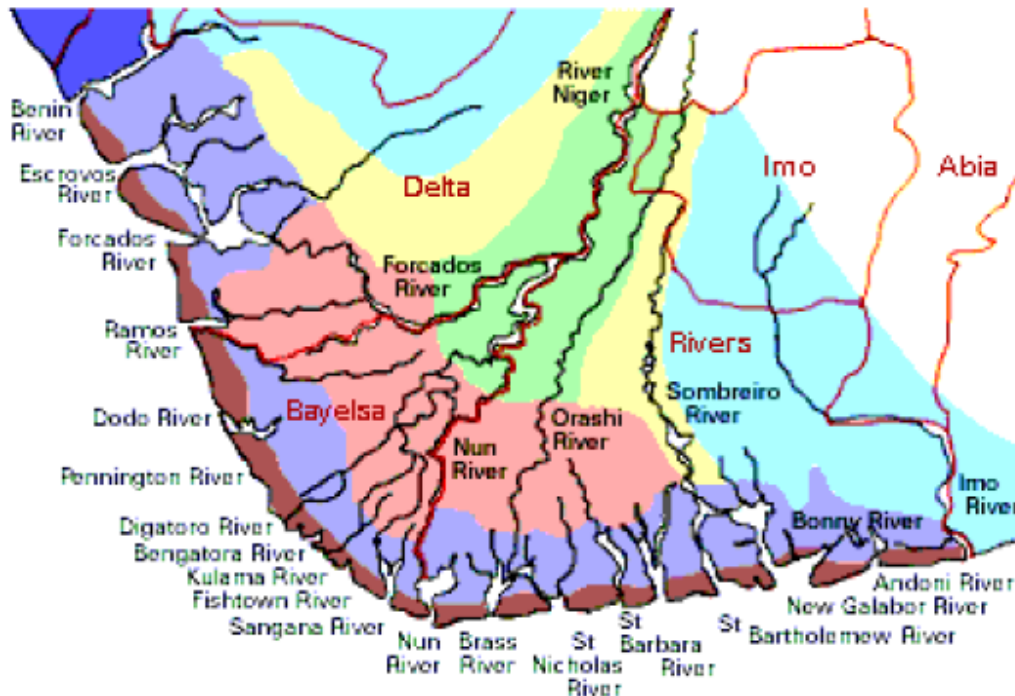
Nigeria's poor human resource base is considered to be its biggest handicap in attracting foreign capital, improving productivity and reducing poverty. Out of approximately 42.1 million Nigerians eligible for primary school education as at December 2005, only approximately 22.3m are in primary Institutions. 69% of these, just over half of all children complete primary school. At the secondary school level which is the pivot of the entire educational system there are 33.9 Nigerians eligible for secondary school education. At the end of 2005 only 6.4 million children were in secondary Institutions. Secondary education enrollments grew at roughly 10% yearly during the 1990s, but access remains constrained (less than half of secondary school age children attend school) and significant regional disparities in access are evident. Technical education is substantially neglected by policymakers and oriented to the teaching of traditional hand skills that are often divorced from labor market requirements. There are currently only 218 tertiary institutions in Nigeria providing education covering all functional areas. A teeming mass of over 1.5 million youths annually line up to secure a place through the joint admissions and matriculation board (JAMB) for the 148,000 places available in our Universities but to date we have over 4 million Nigerian youth who have failed to secure a place in our Universities (Abolaji Osime, (2006). Higher education enrolls a very modest 4% of the relevant age cohort. This level compares poorly with economic competitors such as South Africa (17%), India (7%), Indonesia (11%) and Brazil (12%)(World Bank, 1999). The adult literacy rate remains low at 63%, compared with an average of 73% for developing countries; the average for Sub-Saharan Africa is around 60% (Economic Commission for Africa, 2002).

In Niger Delta states, covering some 30,000 square kilometres and with over 3,800 settlements and an estimated eight million people, there were only 2,169 primary schools and 545 secondary schools. For primary schools, this implied one school per 3,700 people serving an area of 14 square kilometres, and one school for every two settlements. For secondary schools, the ratio is one school per 14,679 people serving an area of 55 square kilometres, and one school for every seven settlements(NDES report, 2000). The clamor for education in the developing Countries today is extremely high and the infrastructural provisions required for servicing it is very much beyond the scope the Country can provide.

THE CASE FOR THE NIGERIAN DELTA REGION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is defined as comprising the area covered by the natural delta of the Niger River and the areas to the east and west. The natural limits of the Niger River Delta can be defined by its geology and hydrology. Its approximate northern boundaries are located close to the bifurcation of the Niger River at Aboh, while the western and eastern boundaries are around the Benue River and the Imo River, respectively. The area covers approximately 25,900 square kilometers (ERML, 1997). The broader Niger Delta region, which includes all oil-producing areas and others considered relevant for reasons of administrative convenience, political expedience and development objectives, extends the land area to 75,000 square

kilometers. Defined in this way, the Niger Delta consists of nine states (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers) and 185 local governments.



As a source of the global energy supply, the Niger Delta is important within the wider context of the international economic and political system. The Niger Delta produces the oil wealth that accounts for the bulk of Nigeria's foreign earnings. Paradoxically, however, these vast revenues from an international industry have barely touched the Niger Delta's own pervasive local poverty. The local people in the delta regions are acutely aware of how much wealth oil can produce. Oil and gas alone have generated 40% of Nigeria's national GDP over recent decades. Between 2000 and 2004, oil accounted for about 79.5% of total government revenues and about 97% of foreign exchange revenues (CBN, 2005). Yet the Delta is one of the most neglected and undeveloped parts of Nigeria. Thus, the delta today is a place of frustrated expectations and deep-rooted mistrust. Long years of neglect and conflict have fostered a siege mentality, especially among youths who feel they are condemned to a future without hope, and see conflict as a strategy to escape deprivation.

Economically, the Niger Delta region is heavily invested in the oil and gas industry, but despite the fact that this is a non-renewable resource, economic diversification has been limited. Most of the mineral exploitations are undertaken by Multi-national corporations with very little or no value-addedness accruing to the host community. Local people often cannot tap directly into oil industry benefits, including employment. A majority of the people lacks information and technical abilities, and unemployment and underemployment rates are high, especially among youth. Social services (for education, health, recreation, etc.) and physical infrastructure (roads, electricity, water, sewers, etc.) are poor everywhere. The problem of poverty in the midst of ballooning oil revenues has spawned discontent and disillusion. Available data show that limited employment correlates with the highest incidences of youth restiveness. Several angry groups have taken up the fight for equity through agitations for resource control or at least enhanced

allocations in the federally shared revenues from the oil industry. The Niger Delta is virtually in a state of war. (UNDP, 2005).

TOPOGRAPHY, DRAINAGE AND SETTLEMENT PATTERN

Settlement patterns in the delta are influenced by topography and drainage. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) regional master plan determined that there are 13,329 settlements in the region, and 94% of these have populations of less than 5,000. Only 98 settlements, or one per cent, can be regarded as urban centres based on population size. The prevalence of small settlements is explained by a number of factors. First, the environment provides limited space for human settlement, given the fragmentation of land into islands and the occurrence of dry land in isolated pockets thus most settlements are small and dispersed. Second, fishing communities all over the world characteristically dwell in small fishing villages close to their fishing grounds. Thirdly, the Niger Delta is home to many small minority groups, each of which is composed of numerous clans. Each clan cherishes its own private space.

Given this preponderance of small settlements, the task of promoting sustainable human development in the Niger Delta is that much harder. In many parts of the world, the human development agenda has revolved mainly around large settlements. Developmental infrastructure usually involve large capital outlays and great elements of risk, and are therefore more likely to be located in areas where the risks are low and profit or potential use can be maximized. Many products can only be produced economically at a certain scale; many innovations are adoptable by production units of a certain size; and many organizations require a certain minimum support threshold to exist.

All of these factors point to the fact that large settlements, are universally accepted as engines of human and economic development (Abumere 2000, 2004; Mabogunje 1965). Unfortunately, this phenomenon has often fostered inequality in development between urban and rural areas.

EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT SENSITIVE KNOWLEDGE

Education is the key to creating, adapting and spreading knowledge. Basic education increases people's capacity to learn and to interpret information. But higher education increases the technical training needed to build a labour force that can keep up with a constant stream of technological advances. And outside the classroom, peoples' working and living environments are the setting for still more learning, well beyond the ages associated with formal education. Recognizing these benefits, many countries have made great strides in expanding enrollment at all levels of education, and a good number have made primary and even secondary education universal (World Bank 1999).

Education is, first and foremost, an end in itself: an essential ingredient for the full realization of human capacity, within the tradition of Human Capacity Theory. In this framework, education is essential for making informed choices, for seeing beyond the immediate horizon and opportunities, and for having a voice in public decision making. Education is a counterweight to limits on social and economic mobility that are imposed by cultural biases, gender and ethnic discrimination, and history. Broadened educational opportunity also is an instrument through which to meet many other social objectives, including several of the Millennium Development Goals:

Education encompasses teaching and learning specific skills, and also something less tangible but more profound: the imparting of knowledge, positive judgment and well-developed wisdom. Education has as one of its fundamental aspects the imparting of culture from generation to

generation. Education means 'to draw out', facilitating realization of self-potential and latent talents of an individual (Ruth Levine et al., 2003).

Development is not simply an economic process, but a complex whole that has to arise endogenously from deep down inside each society. It springs from the culture in question, and cannot therefore, be reduced to imitating the western world. Contrary to the mainstream Western capitalist thinking, people cannot be developed, as they can only develop themselves. It is therefore important that such a people be equipped in such a manner as to see what development means for themselves; see what the opportunities of development are; and take them to their best advantage.

WHY DISTANCE EDUCATION

Education is seen as a major impetus behind fundamental change or transformation in many societies. This transformation is multi-dimensional in the sense that changes occur across various domains, including the political, cultural, social, economic, individual (intellectual) and technological. In modern Sub-Saharan African societies, the major agent affecting the process of education has been the traditional education system, whose distinguishing features are face-to-face interaction between teachers and learners, structured courses of study, fixed locations for learning, fixed time-tables and a system of certification. Many nations in this region have realized the paramount significance of this formal education, and have made very serious efforts to provide human and material resources for the purposes of educating the citizenry in this way. However, for various important reasons that fall outside of the scope of this report, none of the countries in developing countries have fulfilled the promise of providing education to the entire population through the conventional education system.

It is in this context that distance education is viewed as an appropriate method of delivering education to even the remote parts of these areas. Distance education can be aimed at providing people who have missed educational opportunities at some level, a way to recapture what they have lost without necessarily going back to the classroom. In other words, distance education can provide people with a second chance to receive education. This opportunity at the micro level is seen to be empowering for the poor, as it provides economic opportunities and choices for individuals trying to improve their economic circumstances.

The key concepts shaping these issues are perceived to evolve from a number of broad dictates in the global economy which are intrinsically intertwined with each other. The first is the notion that the knowledge economy has become the key engine of economic growth (World Bank 1999, 2002a). In this context, a country's comparative advantage (and subsequently economic growth) stems from its capacity to use and convert knowledge for the purposes of innovation more efficiently, rather than merely accumulating capital more efficiently. Countries thus need to have a more articulate plan of linking their broad development strategies with their science and technology capacity and human development strategy. Key elements of such a strategy require: a supportive economic institutional regime; an educated and skilled population; a dynamic information infrastructure; and an effective innovation system of firms, research centres, universities and organizations (World Bank, 2002). Countries now need to develop new knowledge for purposes of innovation, access global knowledge effectively and adapt that knowledge to local conditions. The skill set required, it is argued, is beyond the traditional focus on certain technical skills such as literacy, languages, mathematics and science, problem solving and analytical skills. A main part of the task is to impart a certain set of 'competencies' which encourage individuals to act autonomously, use tools interactively and to function constructively as a heterogeneous group (World Bank, 2002).

Distance education has been defined as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. Open learning, in turn, is an organized educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimized in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these. The term 'open and distance learning' is used as an umbrella term to cover educational approaches of this kind that reach teachers in their schools, provide learning resources for them, or enable them to qualify without attending college in person, or open up new opportunities for keeping up to date no matter where or when they want to study.

Given the peculiarities of the Niger delta region of Nigeria, open and distance learning offers the greatest potential of dramatically expanding access to both information and education to children, youth and adults who are excluded from conventional education because of geographic distances, insecurity, poverty, inadequate prior learning experience etc. Open and distance learning is seen in this case as an intervention tool because not only will it offer educational opportunities in the formal sense, it will also serve as an information dissemination tool to inform the people. The Programme can also serve as a delivery vehicle for information into the remote areas of the Niger Delta targeted towards Peace Building, Conflict Resolution, Poverty Alleviation, Capacity Building, Health Issues, Modern Farming Methods and the like. It is our belief that an informed public is much more reasonable than an uninformed one and more capable of helping itself.

ISSUES FACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROGRAMME

The Niger Delta produces the oil wealth that accounts for the bulk of Nigeria's foreign earnings. Paradoxically, however, these vast revenues from an international industry have barely touched the Niger Delta's own pervasive local poverty. The result has been disillusionment and frustration among the people about their increasing deprivation as they watch their physical environment deteriorating at an alarming rate, which hinders economic prospects and harms human well-being.

Difficult topography encourages people to gather in small communities—of the estimated 13,329

Settlements in the region, 94% have populations of less than 5,000. These are rural communities, which offer very limited economic opportunities. Infrastructure and social services are generally deplorable, and vastly inadequate for an estimated regional population of nearly 30 million people. The general neglect of infrastructure, often rationalized by the difficulty of the delta's terrain, has worsened people's access to fundamental services such as electricity, safe drinking water, roads, schools and health facilities that are taken for granted in many other parts of Nigeria. Other elements include the negative impacts of the oil industry, a constricted land area, a delicately balanced environment and extreme economic deprivation.

Wide-ranging and usually destructive environmental changes have stemmed from oil and gas extraction, industrialization and urbanization. Oil spills and gas flares in particular have destroyed natural resources central to local livelihoods. The alienation of people from their land and resources has led to the inefficient use of remaining resources and poor or inequitable land-use practices.

The tension in the region has prompted some local people, especially youths, to prefer quick and profitable gains from conflict over longer term—and frequently unavailable—investments in

education and training. Available data show that limited employment correlates with the highest incidences of youth restiveness (UNDP, 2006).

The very poor infrastructural base has made the Niger delta region very unattractive for the traditional educational setup. Teachers posted to the area by the Delta State Government are usually paid extra incentive to stay in the area, yet they refuse to stay for any elongated periods within the area. Road access is very poor; there is no electricity supply, no portable water for drinking, and no telecommunications facilities in the area. Indeed the average child of 12-years old in some of the areas has never seen a car.

A fundamental structural problem remains the much higher costs of meeting the goals of infrastructural development in the delta region. As a result of the difficult terrain, the costs of providing residential housing, hospitals, schools, roads, water supplies, etc. are much higher than in most other parts of Nigeria. Chief D.S.P. Alamiyeseigha (2005), the former Governor of Bayelsa State, reported that it cost the Bayelsa State Government about N500 million merely to reclaim the land for the 500-bed state hospital. This is only one example of the daunting challenges to achieving the MDGs.

It is our intention that ODL should be used as a delivery vehicle not just for education of the children and the youth but also as a vehicle for informing the entire population in such a manner as to reduce tension and perhaps curb violence in the area. It will also serve as training vehicle for educating the older population on modern and essential techniques in Health care, maternal mortality issues, HIV/Aids, fishing farming and storage techniques etc. What will constitute the solution to the programme proposed is the

DELIVERY MECHANISMS

A range of technologies is available and to choose between technologies we need to look at their strengths and weaknesses, to ask whether the infrastructure is in place to use them, and to examine the costs. In open and distance learning we may use print to present material, the mail to distribute it, and face-to-face tutorial sessions for feedback and dialogue. The development of computer links is beginning to blur the distinction drawn above between distribution and teaching. It is possible, through an internet connection, both to distribute material to learners electronically rather than physically and to teach them, by means of a computer program, or engage in dialogue with them by email or computer conferencing.

Planners are likely to be able to choose between some or all of these technologies. In making choices the planner is likely to be influenced above all by the convenience of the learner, the cost, and the need for a culture of maintenance. It will be necessary to maintain hardware and software: physical equipment needs maintenance and access to specialist staff and supplies. Software will need updating and improving on a regular basis.

Whilst no combination of relevant technologies for deployment is immediately apparent to the authors, we suggest that investigative/feasibility studies and pilot project schemes will be very useful in identifying what mechanisms will be appropriate for the Niger delta environment. A thorough understanding of the local environmental issues will be fundamental in determining the deliverables that will engender a sustainable network of technologies to achieve our objectives. Whilst technology is necessary for an ICT induced rural development, it must not become an end in itself and must foster desirable outcomes.

At this point it may not be possible to fully assess the cost implications of the programme but we are convinced that whatever the cost will ultimately amount to, it will be much less than the current cost in violence, loss of lives, disruption in production of oil and gas, oil spillage and sabotages of oil and gas production facilities. The amount paid by the governments in Nigeria and the companies working in the area as ransom and for other security and contingency measures will more than offset whatever it will cost to control the Niger Delta.

CONCLUSION

The advantages of reaching people in remote areas and in unusual circumstances through Online Distance learning can be explored in the quest for solution to the Niger Delta issue. It is very useful to overcome the extensive infrastructural handicap that is so endemic in most developing Countries but especially in remote areas of developing Countries and has posed the biggest challenge to the effort at building capacities. People can have access to developmental information and engage in all levels of tuition online in a variety of subjects, without being physically removed from their location.

More than any other initiatives for amelioration the events in the Niger Delta, the ODL offers the greatest opportunities for affecting the situation in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. This work is intended to excite interest in this subject and engender discussions that may culminate in a viable solution for the Niger Delta issue in Nigeria.

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