

Bridging the Development Gap in Nigeria: Reaching the Unreached through Open and Distance Learning

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***Abstract:** The reality of underdevelopment in Africa is undeniable. The link between education and the level of economic development in any society has long been established. African countries remain underdeveloped due mainly to a large percentage of illiterates and unskilled worker force within the adult population. There is growing recognition that knowledge is the main driver of development. Higher education, which aims to produce a higher level of skills and knowledge is pivotal to the socio-economic and technological development of any nation. Most developing countries like Nigeria recognize higher education as indispensable to economic growth and for their country's integration into the global economy. However, access to higher education remains a key challenge to Africa as there are millions of people particularly marginalized and vulnerable groups who do not have access to higher education thus limiting their capacity to contribute to national development. It is difficult to develop when a large percentage of the population are excluded from access to education. The open and distance learning (ODL) which enables as many people as are willing to attain education even at tertiary level has been embraced as a plausible strategy towards achieving sustainable development. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) as an ODL institution is strategically positioned to take education to the doorstep of every Nigerian especially those marginalized and disadvantaged through the conventional educational system. Available data shows NOUN has made modest but significant progress in this regard. However, a lot more work needs to be done to scale up education access to this special group as doing so will enhance their livelihood and help in bridging the development gap in Nigeria and by extension Africa. Against this backdrop, the paper examines the importance of education and its relationship to development. It examines the role of ODL in the provision of educational opportunity to different sections of society and thus bridging the gap. The paper reports strategies that NOUN has employed in reaching the unreached population and the challenges encountered. It concludes on ways and strategies to further empower and provide space for the space less.*

Key words: Education, marginalized group, equal opportunity, development, open and distance learning, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

African countries including Nigeria are generally categorized among "third world countries" which are characterized by underdevelopment of their human and natural resources and the poor quality of life of the majority of their citizenry. There is massive lack of infrastructure, the people lack proper and adequate food and living conditions are so abject that more than half of the people in the continent survive below the poverty line. Indeed Africa is constantly presented as the typical face of underdevelopment, with images of malnourished and dying children and parents, and the continent appears to depend on aid and donations just to keep up the appearance of decent humanity

One of the factors that is still widening the gap between developed and developing countries all over the world is the issue of illiteracy, and from all indices, the situation is worse in African countries and Nigeria suffers most. The link between education and the level of economic development in any society has long been established. It is the consensus among

experts that the difference between the very advanced countries and the less developed countries of the world can be attributed to the standard of education that has been put in place. While societies with high literacy rate are likely to boast of developed economies, countries with poor literacy rate as found in sub-Saharan Africa are likely to be among the least developed economies. According to experts, once illiteracy is successfully eradicated, other development challenges including poverty, disease and ignorance would be easily addressed.

Education, as often said, is the bedrock of development. There is growing recognition that education is the main driver of development. Higher education, which aims to produce a higher level of skills and knowledge is pivotal to the socio-economic and technological development of any nation. The importance of higher education to the individual in particular and the society in general can not be overemphasized. Higher education plays a necessary and an increasingly important role in human, social, and economic development (Escrigas 2008). Most developing countries like Nigeria recognize higher education as indispensable to economic growth and for their country’s integration into the global economy, both through training of a highly qualified workforce and through innovative research (Carnoy 2006). However, access to higher education remains a key challenge to Africa as there are millions of people particularly marginalized and vulnerable groups who do not have access to higher education thus limiting their capacity to contribute to national development. The rural dwellers, the poor and other marginalized people in Nigeria, and particularly girls and women face serious barriers to higher education. It is difficult to develop when a large percentage of the population are excluded from access to education.

Enrolment rates for higher education in Sub-Sahara Africa are by far the lowest in the world. Currently, the gross enrolment ratio in the region stands at only 5 percent (Bloom, Canning and Chan, 2005). Enrollment rate growth has been slow in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the absolute gap by which it lags behind other regions has increased rapidly. Figure 1 shows that the region's progress has been dwarfed by rapid gains in other regions.

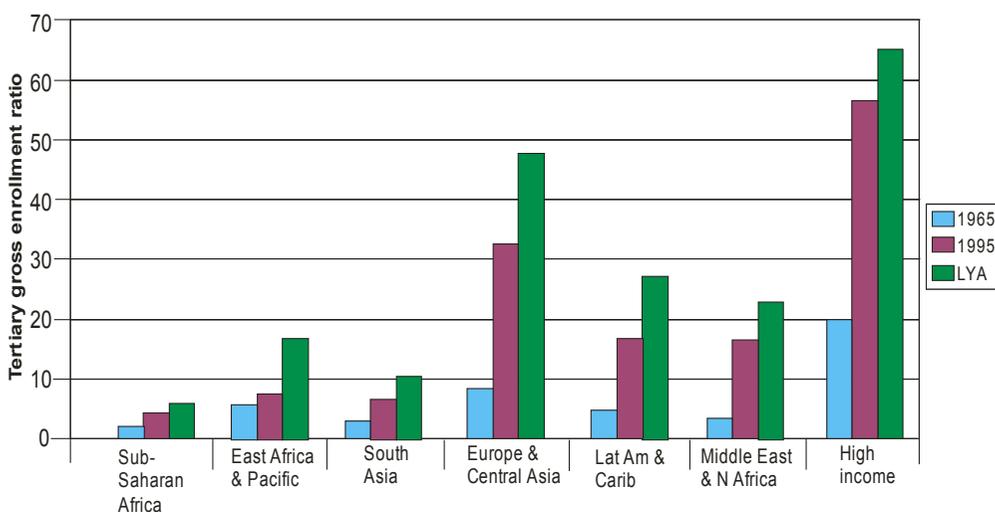


Figure 1: Enrolment rate in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa vis-à-vis other regions

Source: Bloom, Canning and Chan, 2005

Skills and knowledge remain the driving forces of economic growth and social development for any nation. Marginalized people who are excluded from access to learning remain alienated and cannot contribute to nation building and development. Against this backdrop, the paper examines the importance of education and its relationship to development. It examines the role of ODL in the provision of educational opportunity to different sections of society. The paper reports strategies that the National Open University Nigeria (NOUN) has employed in reaching the unreached population. It concludes on ways and strategies to further empower and provide space for the spaceless.

Importance of education and its relationship to development

It is well recognized all over the world that education is an instrument of social and economic transformation. Education has been universally acknowledged as a potent and dynamic instrument for national development and social transformation. It is an important instrument for the development of the individual and the society as it is a weapon against poverty, disease and ignorance (World Bank, 2008). In Nigeria, the importance of education in the development of the individual and the nation is highly recognized. Education according to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is a fundamental human right and the key factor to promoting sustainable development.

The belief in the efficacy of education as a powerful instrument of development has led many nations to commit much of their wealth to the establishment of educational institutions at various levels. According to Abdulkareem (2001), a nation's growth and development is determined by its human resources. The provision of the much-needed manpower to accelerate the growth and development of the economy has been said to be the main relevance of university education in Nigeria (Ibukun, 1997). Precisely, the Nigeria National Policy on Education (2004) highlighted the aims of university education:

- (i) To contribute to national development through high-level relevant manpower training;
- (ii) To develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and the society;
- (iii) To develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
- (iv) To acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
- (v) To promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
- (vi) To forge and cement national unity; *and*
- (vii) To promote national and international understanding and interactions.

There is the general belief that education is an instrument for social, economic and political development. Evidence in support of this assertion can be found in the relationship between the level of educational development and the high standard of living in developed nations of the world, such as the United States of America, Britain, Canada and Japan, among others. They are industrialized, modern economics and democracies mainly because they have well-educated, enlightened, and skilled adult populations. Conversely, African countries, with Nigeria as a typical example, remain underdeveloped due mainly to a large percentage of illiterates and unskilled worker force within the adult population.

Education in general continues to be a crucial means to national development and a well educated and trained population is found to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of any country (Marope, 2005). Education contributes directly to the growth of national income by improving the productive capacities of the labor force. A recent study of 19 developing countries, including Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia, concluded that a country's

long-term economic growth increases by 3.7 percent for every year the adult population's average level of schooling rises. Thus, education is a key strategy for reducing poverty.

Education is so important in the developing world because the economic growth of the country depends on it. How well a country will do depends heavily on how many of its people are educated and capable of supporting the development efforts of the country. Alam (2007) observes that education not only benefits those who gain it through increased income, but also helps overall social development. The return on investment for society will be a skilled workforce that will enable global competitiveness *and* economic growth, while the return for the individual will be an improved career path, increased earning power *and* a better quality of life. Both developing and industrial countries benefit from the dynamic of the knowledge economy. The capacity for countries to adopt, disseminate, and maximize rapid technological advances is dependent on adequate systems of tertiary education. According to Fagerlind and Saha (1989), the concept of 'human capital' suggests that education and training raises the productivity of workers and increases their earnings over their lifetime.

The importance of education even among the ancient people is best illustrated in the following dialogue between a sage and his disciple (Ikube, 2004):

DISCIPLE: Master, if I must live with either a madman or an uneducated man, which of them should I choose?

SAGE: A mad man

DISCIPLE: But why the mad man?

SAGE: Because the mad man's behaviour is to a very large extent predictable and he can therefore be managed. For the uneducated man, his conduct and behaviour pattern cannot be subjected to any form of predictive analysis. His degree of insanity is unlimited and I to fear him.

Indeed, improving the literacy rate in the country can significantly contribute to ameliorating the challenges of poverty, ignorance and disease.

Concept of Development

Development refers to a rise in the standard of living of the population in such a way that most people can satisfy their economic and social needs adequately, and enjoy life more fully. Thus the true meaning of development is the realization of human personality through the progressive elimination of poverty, unemployment and inequality. It involves increase in possession and utilization of resources.

Development is all about progress, advancement, improvement, and getting better and more organized. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Contemporary English (2000) defines development as causing somebody or something to grow gradually, to become or make more mature, to advance or be better organized. Development is a progressive movement towards a better state or condition of living or operation. Any person or group of people that refuses to develop is apt to become stagnant and stink.

Alam (2007) recognized three main schools of thought on the definitions and approaches towards development. The first school is that of the economists. Economists such as Bernstein, Shultz and Psacharapoulos view development primarily in terms of a nation's relative prosperity. A nation's development is thus assessed by measuring any increase in its gross national product (GNP). Development here is seen as achieved through investing in

human capital, and “raising the productivity capacities of societies”. The second school of thought is that of the sociologists such as McClelland, Weber, Inkeles, and Smith. They propose that modernizing a country leads to economic development, and a modern society. With modernization as the main goal, the emphasis is placed on education; technology and industrialization are seen as the agents of transformation. Underdeveloped countries can, they say, be transformed into modern countries with similar economies, societies and politics as those in the prosperous West. In the 1960s and 1970s, another group of theorists such as Seers, Sen and Edwards began to consider development from a human needs perspective. The emphasis here was not so heavily focused on economic growth as the primary indicator of development, but more on assessing the needs of individuals: their freedom, equity, participation and empowerment to fulfill their potential capabilities.

The three theoretical perspectives outlined above consider education to be a key agent of national development, either as a way of developing human capacity, increasing the skilled workforce for modernization, or as a matter of personal freedom, developing capability and empowerment.

Ibeneche (2009) identified six major kinds of capital that extreme poor countries lack: Human capital: health, nutrition and skills needed for each person to become economically productive. Business capital: the machinery, facilities, motorized transport used in agriculture, industry and services Infrastructure capital: roads, power, water and sanitation, airports and seaports and telecommunication systems that are critical inputs onto business productivity. Natural capital: arable land, healthy soil, bio-diversity and well-functioning ecosystem that provide environmental services needed by human society. Public institutional capital: the commercial law, judicial systems, government services and policing that underpin the peaceful and prosperous division of labour. Knowledge capital: the scientific and technological know-how that raises productivity in business output and the promotion of physical and natural capital. Ibeneche noted that Nigeria has not fared well on all these benchmarks.

For the purpose of this paper, development means” significant and steady progression towards a better state in all areas of human endeavours, namely: education, politics, health, economy, social life and reduction of all negative vices, including violence, crime and corruption. It is the extent to which people has access to wealth, jobs, knowledge, nutrition, health, safety, as well as political and cultural freedom. It is improvement in standard of living and quality of life of the generality of Africans.’

Disparity in Nigerian Educational System

Nigeria is a vast country with vast disparities. This tends to prevent the universalisation of education. Over the years, Nigeria has expressed commitment to education with the belief that overcoming illiteracy and ignorance will form a basis for accelerated national development. However, regardless of the incontrovertible evidence that education is crucial to the development of the community and the nation, there remain inequalities in access to education. Despite its potential for leveling opportunities, education is used to perpetrate inequalities. For instance, millions of poor people are still being excluded from the processes and outcomes of education. Concerns have been expressed on the glaring gap between the North and the South with regards to education. While the Northern region is alleged to be educationally disadvantaged, the Southern part is seen as educationally favoured. There is also gender disparity in the system, disparities between demand and supply, disparities between urban and rural schools, and between educational institutions owned and controlled by the Federal Government and those owned and controlled by the States and private

agencies. The list is endless. This is why Teboho Moja (2000) in his assessment of the situation concludes that the entire system reflects privilege and differentiation.

Table 1: Number of candidates that sat for JAMB Examinations 2008 across selected states in Nigeria showing disparity in education between the North and South

S/N	Southern States	Number of Candidates	%	Northern States	Number of Candidates	%
1	Imo	101,201	9.6	Taraba	5,582	0.53
2	Anambra	72,722	6.89	Sokoto	4,926	0.47
3	Delta	71,722	6.73	Jigawa	3,987	0.38
4	Edo	60,714	5.76	Zamfara	3,826	0.36
5	Akwa Ibom	52,635	4.99	FCT	1,726	0.16
6	Abia	49,810	4.72	Yobe	703	0.07

Source: JAMB Records 2008

Table 1 presents the sad reality of the education imbalance between the North and the South. In 2008, for instance, it was reported that a total number of 998,114 candidates wrote the JAMB exam held across the country. The first six states with the highest number of candidates are all from the South. They are Imo with 101,201 candidates, representing 9.6% of the total; Anambra 72,722 (6.89%); Delta - 71,722 (6.73%); Edo - 60,714 (5.76%); Akwa Ibom - 52,635 (4.99%) and Abia - 49,810 (4.72%). The last six states with the lowest number of candidates are all from the North. The states are Taraba with 5,582 candidates (0.53%); Sokoto - 4,926 (0.47%); Jigawa - 3,987 (0.38%); Zamfara - 3,826 (0.36%); Federal Capital Territory (FCT) - 1,726 (0.16%) and Yobe with just 703 candidates (0.07%).

In attempt to address the disparity challenge, the Federal Government has made concerted efforts through various educational programmers to remedy the educational gap. One of such effort is the adoption of open and distance learning.

Open and Distance Learning as a Strategy for Reaching the Unreached and Bridging disparities

Many African countries recognize the lack of capacity in conventional universities to meet the growing demand for tertiary education. Open and distance learning is considered as a way out of the problem. Against this backdrop, it has become abundantly clear that for university education to live up to its billing in the production of high quality man-power, government has to seriously consider exploiting other avenues of providing access to university education in addition to the face-to-face mode and called for a paradigm shift which will facilitate a steady mainstreaming of the open and distance learning mode as a strategy for increasing access. It offers opportunities to reduce the knowledge gap between nations.

Open and distance mode is therefore able to provide knowledge and skills to all corners of this vast country, 'reaching the unreached' thereby enabling the country to realize Education for All goals. People no longer need to move to educational institutions to seek knowledge and expertise, these are packaged and brought to them through open and distance learning (Perraton, 2000).

In many countries, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methods have become an effective and equitable means of providing learning for people in all situations and of all ages. The development of Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria has indeed been a revolution to the

problems of education. ODL is the mode of teaching in which learners are removed in time and space from the teacher. It uses a variety of media and technologies to provide and improve access to quality education for large numbers of learners wherever they may be.

The term ODL reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and its aim is to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The desire to anchor as much as possible to the train of globalization demands that all sectors of society must be literate and this kind of mass education can only be afforded through the distance-learning scheme. Jegede (2003) observed that all nations of the world desirous of a cost-effective, convenient, conducive, efficient and comprehensive way to educate all its citizens have embraced Open and Distance Learning.

ODL provides ample opportunities for disadvantaged and marginalized individuals to upgrade their knowledge and skills in various disciplines. By offering open and distance learning programmes, educational institutions have recognized the critical role that open and distance learning can play in national development. Thus, open and distance learning programmes in Nigeria should be located within the developmental context of the country and be designed and developed to address the developmental needs of the country. The importance and linkage of education to the development of any society is well known. It is in recognition of this importance that the international community and governments all over the world have made commitments for citizens to have access to education.

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) which enables as many people as are willing to attain education even at tertiary level has been embraced as a plausible strategy for attaining personal as well as national development. Across Nigeria, the unreached population includes: learners from remote, rural and isolated areas; learners from linguistic and ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, and minority religious groups; girls and women, especially from rural and ethnic minorities; underperforming boys including those that are at risk or have dropped out; children from migrant families, refugees and stateless children; learners with disabilities and special needs; children in difficult circumstances; learners from very poor families; child labourers, street children, trafficked children and abused children; children affected or infected by HIV and AIDS; and orphans and abandoned children. Many learners suffer from multiple disadvantages associated with being members of particular communities that result in them being socially stigmatized as well as suffering from the specific conditions listed above.

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN): Strategies and challenges in reaching marginalized groups

The flagship of tertiary institution for Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria is the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) which was established by the National Assembly Act of 1983, it got suspended and later resuscitated in 2002 while functional activities commenced in 2003. Establishment of NOUN was timely for the thousands of otherwise qualified Nigerians who needed a university education but were denied access to the existing conventional universities.

The Vision of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is 'to be regarded as the foremost university providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers.' Its Mission is 'to provide functional, cost effective, flexible, learning which adds lifelong value to quality education for all who seek knowledge'. Specifically,

NOUN's Vision and Mission depict the mandate of providing access and ensuring quality in the educational services that are rendered to the students. NOUN reflects a novel development in the provision of higher education in Nigeria. It is the first full-fledged University that operates in an exclusively open and distance-learning (ODL) mode of education and delivers its course materials via print in addition with information and communication technology (ICT).

For instance, in fulfilment of its mandate as articulated in its Vision and Mission, NOUN has taken practical steps to promote equal educational opportunity through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. It has provided education to reach the hitherto un-reached segment of the population especially those denied access on the basis of one social consideration or the other including girls and women in *purdah*, the physically challenged, those in employment, those who have passed the age of admission into regular universities, married adolescent girls, girls and women who dropped out of school, prison inmates, ethnic minority groups as well as other disadvantaged people. NOUN came to the rescue and affords them the opportunity to embark on courses of their choice within their vicinity and without contradicting any societal dictates. They are being trained and given the opportunity to contribute their own quota to national development.

In line with the purpose of this paper, data were obtained from the Academic Records to examine the extent NOUN has lived up to its mandate as articulated in its vision and mission. The paper focuses on disadvantaged individuals, those who tend to be excluded from access to education in conventional institutions due to their perceived limitations, herein referred to as 'Special Learners'. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of this category of individuals who are registered as regular students of NOUN.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage distribution of Special Learners in NOUN

S/N	Category	Frequency	%
1	Girls and women in <i>purdah</i>	12	0.02
2	The physically challenged	417	0.76
3	Those in employment	43,606	80.4
4	Older students who have passed the age of admission into regular universities	33,209	61.3
5	Married adolescent girls	16	0.03
7	Those studying Access Programme to remedy their deficiencies	1,752	3.2
8	Lifelong Learners acquiring skills in various occupations	1,790	3.3
9	Prison inmates	13	0.02

Source: Students Records Data Base NOUN 2010

The overall student population in NOUN is currently about 65, 000. Among these, Table 2 shows that girls and women in *Purdah* make up 12, representing 0.02% of the total population; the physically challenged - 417 (0.76%); those in employment - 43,606 (80.4%); older students - 33,209 (61.3%); married adolescent girls -16 (0.03%); those studying Access Programme to remedy their deficiencies - 1,752 (3.2%); Lifelong Learners acquiring skills in various occupation 1,790 (3.3%) and prison inmates - 13 (0.02%).

Evidence presented in Table 2 shows that NOUN has taken practical steps towards promoting equal educational opportunity and empowering people who are perceived disadvantaged in various ways. It has provided education to reach the hitherto un-reached

segment of the population especially those who may have been denied access in conventional system on the basis of one social consideration or the other. NOUN came to the rescue and affords them the opportunity to embark on courses of their choice within their vicinity and without contradicting any societal dictates. They are being trained and given the opportunity to contribute their own quota to national development.

As observed in Table 2, the population of students in the following categories is relatively low - girls and women in *purdah*, married adolescent girls, and prison inmates - compared to other categories. It is however certain that the population will continue to increase given NOUN's commitment to its vision and mission as well as the level of outreach sensitization campaign.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of education to human beings cannot be over emphasized. The link between higher education and personal and socio-economic development has intensified the need to take advantage of ODL to ensure that greater numbers of citizens have expanded access to quality higher education. Because of the correlation between education and development, investment in higher education is important, especially in the developing world. African policy makers may therefore do well to increase investment in education as a mechanism for speeding up the development process in the region. There is great need for partnership and collaboration between governments, non governmental organizations, and the private sector in any formulation and implementation of policies and programmes towards attainment of the goals of education for all and national development. To ensure educational equality in Nigeria, it is necessary that all inequalities and discrimination based on sex, state, religion, tribe, language and certain traditional and cultural practices be abolished. Also, there is need for NOUN to widen its outreach enlightenment campaign to target rural dwellers particularly girls and women, the nomads, and other hard-to-reach members of the society. Educational institutions offering ODL should be encouraged to expand the scope of their programmes to meet the needs of various categories of disadvantaged members of the society. Equally, government should subsidize ODL programmes to allow indigent learners have access to quality education.

Education for all and elimination of adult illiteracy will most likely translate into better food, better health, more employment prospects, and ultimately better quality of life for the people, which is the essence of national development. Reaching the unreached and marginalized in education is therefore imperative for countries intent on bridging development gap.

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