



Chapter IX

ICT-Enabled Education in Africa: A Sober Reflection on the Development Challenges

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Abstract

This essay prompts critical thinking on the way ICT-enabled education programs in Africa have been conceptualized and implemented. It reflects mainly on the experiences of the African SchoolNet movement over the past decade. It highlights important lessons and demonstrates the beneficial effects of technology-enhanced learning programs on African learners and teachers who have had the privilege of being included in SchoolNet initiatives. However, it also shows that the accumulated interventions and programs to date remain insignificant in scale to catalyze a resounding shift toward resolving the crisis in Africa's education systems; it makes the case for integrated system-wide, locally led approaches that soberly takes account of the challenges imposed by globalization. The chapter traces the historical evolution of frameworks to promote African inclusion in the information society, and allusions are specifically made to the emergence of the NEPAD eSchools, and the Global eSchools and Communities Initiative of the UN ICT Task Force, which hold the

potential for advancing the frontiers of learning in Africa. Here, the author emphasizes, however, that these new initiatives need to draw on the accumulated learning and experience of the SchoolNet movement over the past 10 years in Africa to succeed. Finally, the chapter raises the dearth of evidence-based research made in Africa by Africans who would verify or refute the case for stronger investment in ICTs for education. It then proffers suggestions on areas for further research.

Introduction

Human resources are the essential infrastructure, without which technology means nothing. (Castells, 2001, p. 155)

The current practice of applying new information and communication technologies in the education systems in Africa is cause for concern. Much of the existing interventions have largely, although not exclusively, been informed by the discourse on bridging the digital divide, ICT for development (ICT4D), and their concomitant supply-side approaches mainly suggested by international donors, and private-sector and development agencies. Often these engagements have not clarified Africa's vision for technology-enhanced learning beyond the setting of numerical targets for universal access and ICT literacy; neither have they been integrated within debates on achieving development goals beyond the narrow scope of digital-divide issues. Indeed, ICTs offer the potential for substantial improvement in education access and delivery, particularly in a developing-economy context. However, there remain obstacles of a systemic nature that militate against the realization of this potential. This systemic context is influenced by a parallel Northern-led discourse on bridging the digital divide on the one hand, and, in contradiction, an imposing framework of globalization that continues to foster social exclusion on the other hand.

This chapter critically discusses Africa's experiences with ICT for education (ICT4E) initiatives in current schooling systems. Because the author has been intimately involved in the African SchoolNet movement, there is a strong bias regarding this experience over the past 10 years. The chapter treats examples of the successful application of ICTs in African schools and their actual and potential developmental spin-offs with caution and warns of the disconnection with glaring social, infrastructural, economic, and political realities that militate against further system-wide success. The chapter further provides perspectives on future potential trends in ICT for education in African schools and concludes with proposals for Africa to proceed far more ambitiously in its drive to make the next century a truly African century.¹

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