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MAKING BOLD AND LANDMARK DECISIONS IN EDUCATION: INTRODUCING TELECENTRES FOR RURAL EDUCATION IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract:

Purpose:
Recognizing the government's willingness to have most of its citizens educated with a view to foster national development, the purpose of this paper was to propose an approach that can be adopted to narrow the gap between those educated in urban areas and those educated in rural areas of Zambia using telecentres. The paper shows how telecentres can be utilised to narrow the various gaps that exist among pupils, students and adult learners in urban and rural areas.

Design/Methodology/Approach:
A desk review of relevant literature on gaps among citizens educated in urban areas and those educated in rural areas as well as the use of telecentres in education was conducted.

Findings:
Findings indicate that a number of gaps currently exist between Zambians educated in urban areas and those educated in rural areas. Literature also shows that there is potential to use telecentres for educational purposes as information communication technologies (ICTs) have started being utilised by educational institutions both in urban and rural areas of Zambia.

Practical implications
As presented in this paper, it is practically possible to apply telecentres in education for narrowing the gap between those educated in urban areas and those educated in rural areas. However, in order to implement the proposed approach, concerted efforts in form of bold and landmark decisions to adopt the use of telecentres must be made by the government and other concerned stakeholders.

Originality/Value
The paper has original thinking in as far as the desire to use telecentres and not just ICTS for purposes of reducing educational levels for development purposes is concerned. Further, the paper is of value to educational policy makers as well as information professionals who have the desire to apply ICTs in education for emancipation of the rural poor in Zambia.

Paper type*:* Conceptual paper.

Keywords:
Telecentres, Information Communication Technologies, Educational disparities, Rural education

1.0 INTRODUCTION

National development cannot be achieved without an educated citizenry. With this recognition, it is every well meaning government's wish that most, if not all of its citizens get educated. With the advent of the knowledge economy, the need to have many people educated has become even more apparent. This urgent need is as a result of the knowledge economy which thrives on the availability of knowledge workers as most work and economic activities have become knowledge-based (Technology Education, 2002).

The importance of education for national development purposes has always been a priority for developed nations which spend significant amounts of money to educate their people. In developing countries especially those in Africa, education spending has been dwindling. This inadequate expenditure on education may be viewed to represent less commitment by governments to the value placed on education in national development purposes.

Once educated, people become informed, knowledgeable, information literate, and also acquire pragmatic skills that enable them participate in national development activities effectively (Ministry of Education, 1996). However, for this to be tenable, information that is generated from various economic activities need to be managed in order to help citizens in making decision that affect their lives. To this end, incorporation of information as a resource for national development becomes inevitable. Thus, a critical review of developed countries reveals the existence of well developed mechanisms, systems and approaches for managing information for national development. Sustenance of these approaches requires the availability of educated citizens who can manipulate information and make use of it for various developmental decisions. This fact, may explain the lack of such systems in Africa where most citizens are still not educated and information management activities are still poor.

In order to ensure that most people have access to education, nations must open up many channels to their citizens for learning purposes. Thus, apart from formal learning in class, distance education, continuing education, and the use of information communication technologies (ICT) tools have become more pronounced in the knowledge economy. The need to employ such strategies should be viewed as a mitigation factor in view of many challenges affecting education in many African countries in general and in Zambia in particular. One of the ICT access points that can be employed to ensure mass education of citizens is the telecentre.

Indeed, as presented above, the role of education in national development has for a long time been applauded. However, achieving development heavily depends on the availability of educated citizenry. Recognizing this fact therefore entails that the levels of education among citizens of a given country must not be at worrying disparities. Similar situations and exposures must be attained by all in order to achieve a synergized effort to deliver development. In Zambia, however, despite the government's efforts to achieve education for all, a huge gap exist between education in urban areas and education in rural areas in many aspects.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to show how the current disparities in as far as educational levels of Zambians educated in urban areas and those educated in rural areas can be reduced through telecentres to support national development efforts. In pursuing this purpose, the paper has endeavoured to discuss the following broad research questions:

i) What are the disparities that exist between education offered in urban areas and the education offered in rural areas of Zambia?
ii) What is the potential of using telecentres to reduce educational disparities that exist within the Zambian education system?

2.0 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach through comprehensive review of literature was employed in this paper. This research approach was chosen based on the purpose of the study which was premised on use of secondary data. As such, the themes addressed in the review were based on the research questions. The themes included issues on gaps that exist in urban and rural educational set-up in Zambia and literature that supported the use of telecentres in rural settings.

3.0 THE ZAMBIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The Zambian educational system has three (3) layers namely basic education that takes nine (9) years (grade 1 to grade 9), high school education which takes three (3) years (grade 10 to grade 12) and Tertiary education which takes up to four (4) years (Ministry of Education, 1996). The formal learning that takes place at all these levels is envisaged to produce certain levels of literacy appropriate to the age levels of individuals and enabling to meet societal expectations at large. Thus, at six years of age, a child is expected to enter primary school and complete tertiary school approximately at the age of twenty-two (22) years when they are deemed to be ripe enough to contribute to the development efforts of the country.

However, it is believed that in order for an individual to be relevant to the demands of society, solid education must be provided from an early stage. Thus, learning is indeed a life-long process that is not tied to formal educational levels. This said therefore entails that learning begins at home and continues at home even when pupils and students are not in class. Further, even after normal formal schooling, learning must continue using informal ways to solidify and complement learning that has been attained in class.

Currently, the Zambian education system, to a greater extent, places less emphasis on learning outside class (non-formal education). This can be attributed, to a larger extent, to factors such as individual interest, parental guidance and the enabling environment. However, these factors can be induced through relevant commitments and decisions in government policy. For instance, government can introduce information provision tools

such as radios, television and internet through which people can get educated. These tools if employed can complement both class-based and off-class learning.

3.1 Disparities between Rural and Urban Education in Zambia

As already noted, Zambia has a well established educational system. However, the education offered as well as the literacy levels that are acquired between those educated in rural areas and those educated in urban areas differ significantly. This trend is common in most African countries including Zambia (Sahn and Stifel, 2002). The disparities in literacy levels not only become evident in results obtained by learners in national examinations offered at various levels but also in participation in national matters. For instance, at grade 12 final examinations, rural pupils usually perform poorly as compared to their counterparts in urban areas. In 2005, out of a total of 2, 564 who sat for grade 12 examinations in North Western province only 47% managed to obtain full certificates whereas out of a total of 5, 547 who sat for grade 12 examinations in Lusaka province 65% managed to obtain full certificates (Ministry of Education, 2006). This situation has prompted institutions such as the University of Zambia to introduce equity measures such as the introduction of rural affirmative criteria in its admissions procedures in order to avail access to University education for people from rural areas. Such measures are aimed at ensuring access to University education to those who are disadvantaged (rural learners) within the Zambian learning environment. Thus, a number of factors can be attributed to the obtaining disparities between rural and urban dweller in Zambia in as far as education is concerned.

With regard to participation in national matters, very few people in Zambia who are educated live in rural areas as compared to those educated who live in urban areas (Central Statistical Office 2004). This reality could be due to, among other factors, the many formal employment opportunities that prevail in urban areas. Taking this fact, it may be deduced that this situation may explain why the ruling party in government usually gets rejected by urban dwellers in general elections and get massively supported by those who live in rural areas. This phenomenon may be explained by the fact that educated people tend to be more informed and therefore make well informed decisions compared to illiterates or semi-literates. To sum this assertion, Furuholt and Kristiansen (2007:2) ague that "economically disadvantaged countries and rural and peripheral districts … tend to fall further behind in human resource development as well as in economic progress and political participation ...".

Another factor that can be attributed to cause disparities between the rural and urban dwellers in the Zambian educational system is the orientation of children. For most children born in urban areas, it is much easier to get exposed to educational information such as educational programmes on television channels provided by the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC), private television service providers such as Multi-Choice, commonly known as DSTV and MUVI TV. Exposure to programmes such as CBeebbies broadcasted on DSTV certainly introduces a child to learning that can never be matched in many aspects to a rural born child. The benefits of such educational programmes include the introduction of children to spoken and written English language

and the introduction of children to numeracy and literacy skills. Being born and bred in such an environment gives a child in the urban area an upper hand in terms of learning when compared to those in the rural areas. Unfortunately, for Southern Africa in general, and Zambia in particular, early child development (ECD) efforts still lack political will and national policies (Shibeshi, 2006).

Another factor that can be said to influence the education disparities between urban and rural dwellers is the availability of books and library facilities in urban areas in comparison to rural areas. The Zambia Library Service libraries as well as the Local Government libraries are mostly found in urban areas. In addition, most schools in urban areas have libraries that are to some extent well stocked compared to those in the rural areas (Kalusopa, 1999). Thus, a leaner based in an urban area has access to more educational materials than one based in rural areas.

In order to complement their learning, urban learners also enjoy a facility known as extra lessons. In Zambia, it has become a common trend for most learners in urban areas at all levels of education to pay for lessons in addition to attended formal classroom lessons. This practice has been made more pronounced by the availability of entrepreneurs in the education sector who offer various educational services such as extra lessons, knowing very well that once well advertised, the market for such services is readily available. Thus, in reciprocation, learners respond to educational market adverts in order to fulfill their educational desires and get enrolled in classes for extra lessons.

The availability of a fairly developed telecommunication infrastructure also favours learners based in urban areas than those in the rural areas (Isaacs 2007). Because of the availability of such infrastructure, learners have easy access to internet information services where they can easily download information materials for learning purposes. This fact is in contrast to the situation for learners in rural arrears. Further, it is much easier to learn through distance mode when in or near urban areas than when based in rural areas as internet and postage services are not so easily accessible (Chifwepa, 2006).

The above presented disparities are but among the many other challenges that rural learners face in their quest to get educated. Solutions to these challenges must be found for the nation to be in equilibrium with efforts towards national development to come from both urban and rural citizens.

3.2 Status of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Zambian Schools

With information communication technologies (ICTs) being broadly adopted for many activities world over, the Zambian government has not been left behind in recognizing the value of ICTs in Zambian schools. Further, as indicated in its Fifth National Development Plan, the Zambian government even intends to establish “rural community multi-purpose telecentres” (Isaacs 2007:6). Thus, it is not surprising that both urban and rural schools in Zambia such and Kabulonga Girls High School (urban) and Chikankata Secondary School (rural) have ICTs as components of learning for pupils. Despite these

developments, Isaacs (2007:3) argues that "the penetration levels of ICTs in Zambia's education institutions remains low with those schools that are equipped mostly utilizing second-hand refurbished computers". Isaacs (2007) further indicates that most of the computers found in Zambian schools are used for computer studies as a school study subject.

In view of the above, it may remain a myth to think that Zambian schools utilize computers in general and ICTs in particular to support the learning process of pupils other than as a study subject. Thus, imagining the availability of computers for learning purposes in libraries found in most Zambian schools may be just wishful thinking. It is indeed from this recognition that the need for an integrated learning approach that utilizes ICTs not only as a study subject but also as a learning enabler through which learners can acquire learning materials for various educational purposes emerges.

3.3 The role of Telecentres in Education

According to Gomez, Hunt and Lamoureaux (1999:17), a telecentre is "a physical space that provides public access to ICTs for educational, personal, social and economic development". Telecentres are information communication technologies (ICTs) based institutions whose main focus if to provide various information-based services to an identified clientele. A telecentre can be a stand alone organisation or indeed a unit within another organisation. The main distinguishing characteristic of telecentres from other information services based institutions is that the information services provided to a large extent are supported by the use of ICTs. A number of telecentres have been created in many countries addressing various issues affecting the underprivileged in our society (Ibrahim, Sulaiman and Faziharudean, 2008:352; Pather and Gomez, 2010:1). Among the issues addressed include education. Stressing their role in education, Bailey (2009:5) informs that:

> Many community-based telecentres in development contexts are associated with educational activities involving computer and digital literacy programmes. Telecentres have been recognizing the need for supporting other educational endeavours by providing basic literacy classes, homework programmes and sports, arts, and cultural educational activities

Further, to strengthen the notion for incorporating telecentres in education provision, Proenza, Bastidas-Buch and Montero (2001:12) argue that:

> The starting point should be the strengthening of the formal education system, so that it incorporates the effective use of the new technologies. Teacher training is often a critical determinant of impact on youngsters. Telecenters can be an important complement to formal education reform, providing support to students and teachers after school hours and increasing Internet access for teachers, parents, recent graduates and the community at large.

The role played by telecentres in education cannot be overemphasized. Firstly, it should be understood that education is a life long process which is individual centered. As such, complementing class-based learning using ICTs can prove advantageous as people can quench their learning desires by pursuing further studies through the support of ICTs. Through ICTs, it is possible to acquire basic literacy and also obtain higher degrees at

masters and doctorate levels. Describing the Jamaican experience, Bailey (2009:5) notes that:

> In Jamaica, homework programmes have been established as part of community telecentre activities, providing access to computers and the Internet in a supervised environment during a specified period where students can do their homework. Students have found the homework programmes beneficial noting that '*it offers the convenience to do school assignments*'. They also highlighted that '*Parents know that the CAP* [community access point] *site is safe*'. Parents have also expressed satisfaction with the programme stating '*It's a supervised environment for the students*'. The homework centres have meant that telecentre staffs have had to adapt to the needs of students using the telecentre facilities. For example, a teacher who volunteers at one of the centres noted that '*students have to be taught how to read and synthesize and not plagiarize straight from the Internet*'. In this regard, it was also observed that the lack of Internet access at some schools was affecting the learning experience as '*teachers without Internet access are not recognizing plagiarism*'. Telecentres therefore realized the need to offer training to teachers as '*it made no sense to train the children only, teachers need to be up-to-date on what's happening*'…

Secondly, formal education alone is not enough to enlighten people on various interests that characterize their lives at community, national or indeed international level. As such, in order to broaden the exposure and learning base of individuals, various ways such as the use of ICTs are now employed. With ICTs, people are able to access various types of information through channels such as television, radio and computers where they are harnessed into a variety of telecentres (Abbasi, 2007).

As provided so far, exposure to various life activities, issues and life styles to a large extent influences people's attitudes to life. Thus, the more an individual is exposed, the more likely that they will tackle life situations from a more informed position. In Zambia however, the levels of social stratification as presented in this paper leaves a lot to be desired. Urban-based individuals in Zambia have access to a variety of information through ICTs compared to those in the rural areas. Thus, in order to leverage this situation there is an immediate need to introduce ICTs in form of telecentres in rural Zambia. This introduction should be done through government supported mechanisms such as legislation and policy, a road map adopted by other countries such as South Africa (Pather and Gomez, 2010:6). Using this channel might be much easier owing to the fact that the government has a large presence in disadvantaged areas through schools. Infrastructures such as buildings are available in some cases. Electricity is no longer an issue as solar energy as well as the use of generators are now among other alternatives to communities that lack generated electricity.

The rationale for using school premises for telecentres is to encourage young people to get exposed to ICTs at an early stage. Since ICTs in this case would include Television and Internet, pupils in rural areas can have an opportunity to learn many other things that are not provided for in formal school curricular (Ariyabandu, 2009; Proenza, Bastidas-Buch and Montero, 2001:12).

However, besides adopting telecentres in schools, the government can still introduce telecentres in other places other than school set-ups. This would be more conducive to adult learners who may wish to access information on more life based issues other than for educational purposes only.

In introducing telecentres in rural settings, the government can be supported by other partners such as non-governmental organisations that operate in certain rural areas. Mechanisms for sustaining these telecentres should also be considered. For instance, not only are funds for various operational activities required but also competent staff to manage them on daily basis. Availability of such people requires some form of investment in their training.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When critically viewed, the situation presented in this paper makes one question the extent to which the current efforts towards education provision services in rural areas are genuine. One fact that should be understood is that, when policy and decision makers realize a niche such as ignorance and illiteracy, it is possible to perpetuate it in order to remain in control of power (Boughton, 2008:5). Thus, alternative ways for reducing these disparities should be sought for, exposed, and recommended for possible exploration and implementation by those entrusted with power to make decisions. Because of the implications that come with an educated nation, introducing telecentres for rural education in Zambia through formal recognition indeed can only be made through making landmark and bold decisions. Such decisions not only have the ability to dispel doubts on the extent to which government approaches to education provision to the rural poor are genuine but also connote a change in mind set of those entrusted with powers to run government affairs with integrity and genuine will to move Zambia forward. Further, as argued by Etta and Parvyn-Wamahiu (2002: IX), advocating for the use of telecentres for education provision also requires making bold and land mark decisions owing to the fact that:

> diffusion of new ICTs on the African continent is not extensive because of the recency of their introduction. The continent's entry and participation in the information society (revolution) … can be said to have commenced in the mid 1990s

Despite the value placed on telecentres for rural areas advancement through information and knowledge acquisition and transfer (Ariyabandu, 2009:2), indeed, twenty years later, it is still an observable fact that "Sub-Saharan Africa remains at the bottom of the list of developing regions in Internet usage" (Furuholt and Kristiansen, 2007:5). Due to this observation, it may be argued that most individuals with powers to make decisions are not so keen to recommend the use of ICTs in education as they are still skeptical on a number of ICT implications in education. It is therefore recommended that the following options be considered by the government for purposes of reducing the urban-rural divide in terms of ICT enabled education provision:

a) Enforce legislation and policies that support the creation of telecentres as learning tools for equipping rural dwellers with knowledge and skills that can lessen the existing gaps within Zambian educational system.

b) Transform school libraries into telecentres through relevant policy changes with the broad framework of education provision. This will enable pupils access

desirable education similar to the education accessed by those based in urban areas.

c) Establish general telecentres in rural areas that can serve information provision services to all rural dwellers other than for education purposes only.

d) Transform available infrastructure such as those for the Zambia Library Service into telecentres for educational purposes.

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted an important reform within the education system in Zambia that should be highly considered. With the consolidated information society that Zambia finds itself in, it is no longer justifiable to have digital divide within a nation whose developmental efforts depends on all of its citizens irrespective of their location (urban or rural). Thus, high level decisions should be made to introduce telecentres in rural areas for both educational and national development purposes. Failure to do this will perpetuate the existing disparities and therefore Zambians will continue operating at uneven levels. The consequences of such a situation will be perpetuated poverty, illiteracy and ignorance among the rural masses.

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