



Information

Much of the information used in this ideas paper was gathered from interactions with students, out-of-school youth, educational institutions and employment agencies in Nigeria between 2013 and 2018. We are venturers in leveraging e-learning and innovative use of local resources to expand education opportunities in Nigeria. We are developing an adaptive project package and social enterprise model which touches on several aspects of e-learning and innovation.

➔ Education for All 101: Serving the Underserved

The world today

In this sci-fi age of Google Glass and SpaceX, it is not out of place for one to wonder the potential that technology and innovation hold in solving some of the most pressing problems that are faced by developing countries and their people. A double-barreled problem in Africa, and key to unlocking the massive potential of the continent if addressed, is limited access to education and very high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment. The two are connected.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which are academic and technical courses powered by technology and innovation, are mostly free and accessible with an internet connection from any part of the world. MOOCs have become so successful that former President Barack Obama endorsed them in his *State of the Union* address in August 2013. Then, the White House also proposed a \$260 million fund to support innovative approaches to improving higher education outcomes in the United States. But the United States and most of the Western world are light years ahead of African states in terms of access to quality education and active support to innovative approaches to improving higher education outcomes. So why does this matter for Africa?

State of the Union Africa

It is no longer news that about 40-80% of the entire populations in most sub-Saharan African countries live on less than two dollar a day. Majority of the continent's people live in rural areas with poor infrastructure. The cost of education is prohibitive for majority of families and people of school age. It is still a luxury in many far-removed villages to have a lighted bulb at night. For millions, the technology which powers open education is inaccessible. In some areas cultural, religious, social and economic factors hinder access to basic education.

“In sub-Saharan Africa, the poorest girls will not achieve universal primary completion until 2086” — [UNESCO](#)

The wave of revolution activated by MOOCs in the education sector is yet to fully penetrate Africa. MOOCs are different from brick-and-mortar classrooms in fun, convenient, engaging and pocket-friendly ways. At [EduTrust](#), we see MOOCs and other innovative approaches to expanding access to education as a complement to brick-and-mortar classrooms, not as a replacement. Can anything be done differently to fast-track universal primary completion to the poorest girls in sub-Saharan Africa? We think YES!

“Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world,” in the wise words of Nelson Mandela. It gets better: supercharge that weapon with technology and innovative use of local resources and we can make that change happen a lot faster, more effectively and equitably.

We can learn a lot from MOOCs in terms of improving the quality of teaching and learning, tearing down the walls of the classroom and making education accessible to all. The takeaway is this: don’t just bring people to school; take the school to people. To do this however is not exactly as cool as it seems; it involves working hard and working smart.

The underserved

For those underserved by the formal schools sector, their clear and present *need* is not specialised education on space science and exploration but accessible, affordable, relatable and useable educational resources that are meaningful in terms of improving their opportunities for securing jobs and earning a decent income, or equipping them with skills that will enable them create opportunities for themselves and their communities and generate a livable income.

Educational tools and resources must be accessible, affordable, relatable and useable

The above four conditions apply not only to resources for students but also to resources for teachers of underserved students and communities. Some tertiary schools and departments now have institutional subscription to e-libraries, online resources and interactive spaces for students. Sadly the cost and conditions for entry into such schools remain prohibitive for millions.

Bridging the G—A—P

What gaps need to be filled to improve access to quality education for the underserved? What needs to be done to make the teaching and learning experience better? For the underserved, useful resources that already exist can be leveraged and adapted to improve the learning experience. The pressure points here are at the basic, pre-university, university and immediate post-university (first degree) levels. Below are seven important factors.

① Cost

Access to educational resources should be free or heavily subsidised and incentivised. For governments at all levels, private educational service providers, NGOs and foundations supporting education, ICT firms and other stakeholders, the target should be to deliver more with less and to deliver value. With respect to online platforms for learning, the cost of streaming content is still very high in many parts of Africa and it costs between \$100 and \$300 to enroll for some available

subjects. 3G, 4G and 5G internet are still inaccessible and prohibitive to millions. Progress is slow and this needs to change.

2 R & D

The youth are central to our education model, yet they are hardly if ever involved in designing their own curriculum or in influencing the teaching and learning ecosystem that suits their needs. For instance, given that students are more ICT savvy today than they were 20 years ago and that the way they are socialized to learn is widely different from the learning environment of the 1970s to 1980s, it is surprising that there is yet to be a focused attempt at or large-scale experiment with gamification models for learning in Africa. Also, given the rise of real and virtual social networks in the age brackets, schools are yet to introduce social networking models for problem solving, group projects and take-home assignments. Education is significantly moving away from the old colonial paradigm of the 3Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic) to a new paradigm which prioritizes life skills and practicable knowledge which is relevant within and outside the workplace of the twenty-first century.

3 Content

For impact, the content of educational resources must be localised and understandable to the people without sacrificing quality. At the basic level, the use of local languages for instruction should be encouraged. Foreign languages should be taught as a second language. Even at the post-graduate level, interactions with most people revealed that they related better with localised content (using local instructors and local examples but in English language) than with videos, demos and instructions facilitated by foreigners.

4 Platform

The means of delivery of complementary education resources should as much as practicable not require people to dip into their own pockets to purchase new tools such as laptops and textbooks or to maintain classrooms and the school environment. For people living on less than two dollar a day, the cost of keeping a child in the formal schools sector is already prohibitive. For stakeholders, a shift in orientation is essential. A tiny fraction of the governments' annual budgets and development funds for education which usually go to physical infrastructure can be committed to developing online and mobile platforms, apps, SMS-enabled feedback, widely broadcast radio and TV programmes, and offline packages such as DVDs.

5 Attitude

Youth between ages 15 and 25 still want the on-campus experience. It is hip—for Gen-Y and Gen-Z, a lot of boys want to brag to their peers, sag their pants and chase after girls. To get them invested in the complementary distance learning experience, they must be made to see how freely available educational resources can help them prepare for the university and improve their learning experience while in school. Learning should be more fun and social, and should promote

healthy competition. Gamified learning will enable students collect brownie points and other achievements for completing tasks, submitting assignments and meeting deadlines. So they still have something to brag to their peers about.

6 Quality

Nothing beats face-to-face interaction with teachers, students and peers. However, even where supplementary or remedial studies are offered online or by distance learning, outcomes should be comparable. Reduced cost should not translate to loss in quality of teaching and learning. Where tests are taken and graded, appropriate measures can be used to check cheating and malpractice. Happily, the technologies for quality assurance already exist and will get better with time. We do not need to reinvent the wheel.

7 Certification

Certificates are like brownie points for levelling up. They have similar morale boosting effects, only more long lasting and more universally recognised. People want to be awarded certificates as validation of their efforts and achievements in their studies, whether formal or informal. This demand is connected to the fact that for job hunting, certificates are mostly considered the clearest attestation to qualification. To tap into this incentive, online tasks, group projects, take-home and classroom assessments, and exams leading to the award of certificates can be standardised.

What will success look like?

In our brave new world of ultra-high-speed, seamless interconnectivity of bandwidth, ideas, peoples, finance, resources, products and services, nearly anything is possible in cyberspace. Education is not spared in the global move towards digitization and the Internet of Things. The move is inevitable. Therefore, a major challenge to stakeholders in the education sector is to pool together a critical mass of teachers and educators with the right balance of knowledge, skills and commitment to drive change, fueled by innovations in the ICT sector, backed up by positive policy, action and incentives for learning.

Success in this case is not a one-stop destination. Success will entail working towards a meeting point between the processes and the outcomes of the formal education sector and innovative methods for improving the learning experience for the underserved. It will also entail going beyond creating a better learning experience to facilitating the infusion of such learning, knowledge and skills into productive sectors of the society.

Any initiative which seeks to accomplish the above should work closely with existing structures and educational institutions, youth groups and relevant MDAs. Connecting resources to areas of need would also require facilitating partnerships with the private sector, tech companies, NGOs and civil society, and development partners.

Help grow our ideas bank

We are shopping for ideas to make our E-Schools Initiative and innovative use of local resources for education work better for communities in Nigeria and in other African countries.

- Share your experience with MOOCs, apps and online platforms for learning.
 - How will free and accessible education better serve your community?
 - In what form(s) and by which tool(s) can free and accessible education be achieved?
 - In what ways can we improve the learning experience for the underserved?
 - What challenges and opportunities should be considered?
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➔ Education for All 102: Serving the Unserved

The unserved

Further down the line from the underserved are those unserved by the formal schools sector. Little-to-nothing is being done to cater to those out of school and those incapable of accessing the schools. These people are already left behind and are still falling far behind because the “system” is not responsive to their special needs. The way the schools operate and the way curricula are designed ensure that they remain not only deprived but also shut out.

Efforts by governments, institutions, foundations and other stakeholders interested in advancing education in many African countries are mostly geared towards improving the quality of education for those already in the formal education sector or those whom formal education is accessible to. Taking the school to people and communities in remote areas is anything but easy; it is however the only way to reach millions of out-of-school children and young adults.

“More than 10.5 million children are out of the Nigerian [formal] education system and only 4% of girls in northern Nigeria complete secondary school.” — [Aljazeera](#)

Education is at the centre of social change not because it merely confers qualification for jobs or leads to development of special skills, but because it works at the level of changing mindsets—for individuals, communities and whole societies. Education leads to improvement in all sectors and in all walks of life. At the basic level, education is a lifeline for lifting millions of people out of poverty. It is the light that gives those living at the fringes a glimpse of a better world and the chance of having a part in it.

Narrowing the G—A—P

The most promising opportunities for narrowing the yawning gap in education opportunities for the unserved are to be found in collaborative problem solving and innovative use of local resources. The pressure point here is at the basic education level. Below are five important factors.

① **Penetration**

Reaching rural areas with any product or service is a giant logistic hurdle. How do we get to these hard-to-reach people who dwell in places where infrastructure, communication, and personal safety of teachers and other workers are a challenge? In addition to Coca Cola, we can learn a significant lesson from markets and ubiquitous local worship centres which have succeeded in such areas. They all have one thing in common: they see the challenge as opportunity. They

leverage on local conditions and make creative use of local resources. Think global; act local. With respect to education, teacher extension services can be used to reach areas with the most needs. Support workers who are familiar with the people and the terrain should be engaged. This core of service providers can be used in making connections and training of trainers in the communities.

2 Attitude

Change in attitude is an important condition in serving the unserved. Attitude is often affected by economic, social, cultural and religious factors some of which are peculiar to specific communities and should therefore be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Parent outreach and sensitisation should be one of the first steps. Parents who might have been conditioned to believe that schooling is a waste of time need to appreciate how releasing their children and wards would improve their crop yield, productivity, wellbeing and livelihoods in the long term. Educational practices and methods need to be culturally sensitive and need to respect local traditions, institutions and seasons but demonstrate a better way of achieving sustainable outcomes.

3 Influencers

Traditional and religious leaders and other opinion leaders should be co-opted in the mission of taking the school to tens, hundreds and thousands of people in disparate homes and communities. At the local level, these are the gatekeepers and influencers and their views and positions are imbued with legitimacy and credibility—for better or for worse. Faith-based and community-based channels including village heads, age grades and cooperatives can also act as conveners. It is important that they publicly endorse and champion any education initiative or project for it to take firm roots in the communities. It may however be important to maintain a separate and unobtrusive line between educational and religious instruction.

4 Platforms

Oral tradition and storytelling is at the core of the fabric of communal life and should be tapped into. Basic instructions can be designed in the form of folklore, word games, debates, songs and anthems. Mass outreach would require setting up dedicated educational radio and TV stations which can be tuned into with UHF-VHF antennas, mobile phones and small radio receivers. Where useful multimedia resources exist, they should be adapted, for instance voicing over and transcribing educational resources, cartoons and documentaries into local languages.

5 Content

Enabling conditions must be established in a sensitive way before any instruction can take place and hope to take root. At the basic level, content should focus on social values—civic responsibility, national consciousness, service, government, peace and unity, acceptance, tolerance and good neighbourliness, dignity of labour, etc. The benefits of education, self-

development, improved agricultural practices, trade and craft, reading, writing and arithmetic all should be taught. Instruction should be in local languages except for “advanced” classes.

Domino effect: education >> human development >> governance >> security

Happily, the benefits of mass education go far beyond literacy, lifting people out of poverty and improving livelihoods. Even where basic education does not lead to job security and its benefits to the person are not immediately seen by some, it is better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.

On a macro level, it improves governance and human development. Education makes citizens more alive to their duties and more able to hold governments to account for providing public goods. Also, the people are better able to make informed decisions to solve their own problems. Security also gets better. Lack of access to education, youth unemployment and youth exclusion are significant factors of insecurity. Not surprisingly, the unserved are often used as foot soldiers for carrying out daredevil attacks in communities ridden with terrorism and violent extremism.

Test case: Safe Schools Initiative

(This is just one example to show how options can be adapted depending on the context. The context here is acute and endemic insecurity.)

The Safe Schools Initiative which was launched in 2014 for parts of northern Nigeria is a genuine effort to solve a problem in an area of great need. [The rate of school dropout in some parts of north-east Nigeria rose to as high as 70%](#). Many school children who had witnessed mass murders and abductions did not feel safe to go back to school. Teachers and school administrators alike were afraid to return to school.

Curiously, a key element of the Initiative which sought to restore confidence in schools was that schools would be physically guarded by the police, the military and vigilantes which so far have failed to deter recurrent terrorist attacks. In fact, military barracks and police stations have been the targets of attacks in these areas.

It appears that the solution proposed somewhat reinforces the situation which led to the problem in the first place. Even if every school dropout in the past five years went back to schools with improved learning environment, a significant proportion of people of school age in those areas who have long carved out an existence outside the formal schools sector would still be left out.

“E” for extended: E-Schools Initiative

One can think of several reasons why better outcomes would be achieved if an E-Schools Initiative (hybrid distance learning) is integrated into the Safe Schools Initiative, especially for areas most affected by violence and insecurity.

The Safe Schools Initiative does not change the dynamics. All the focus remained on the physical schools infrastructure which still gave terrorists easy and concentrated targets. For the most affected areas, borrowing a leaf from the tactic of diffuse engagement may work better: diffusing the potential "targets" would significantly alter or remove the threat to schools.

Remove classroom walls + prioritise outreach = save schools + lessen insecurity

There is no easy way out. A tailored solution must include platforms which can take basic education into homes, social groups, communities, workshops and farmlands in hard-to-reach locations. Such effort should also outlive the insecurity.

What will success look like?

Imagine that on-air prep lessons can be used to reach those otherwise unserved, and customised instructions in local hubs can be provided for the exceptional ones that would take the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (equivalent of the SAT). Those that "make it" will be a shining example to their peers and their communities that it is possible. This may not happen in a year or two but it is not farfetched if stakeholders commit to doing things differently.

Using a social enterprise model to deliver public goods to millions of unserved populations and communities means that profits would not be the immediate target, and the bottom-line needs to be redefined to embrace social change on a macro level. Due to the fact that politicians and public office holders want to show quick results within a four-year electoral cycle, they are usually not invested for the long term. Such attitude needs to change.

A tiny fraction of the annual education budget of governments at the federal and state levels or a fraction of the fund appropriated for the Safe Schools Initiative could give an E-Schools Initiative or any like intervention a head start. Wider partnerships involving the government, the private sector, tech companies, CSOs and development partners can be leveraged to expand the Initiative.

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