



CREATIVE



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Increased access to education through diversification of the delivery system

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There are three rules to reaching out to tens of millions of children and youth in need of education — diversify, diversify and diversify.

According to UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics (UIS), 58,361,720 children of primary school age worldwide were not attending school in 2019, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for almost half (31,131,274) of this total. The figure is equally staggering for adolescents of lower secondary school age — 60,195,983 to be exact. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 46.9% of the total.ⁱ Several factors contribute to this problem.

Barriers to Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

Poverty, social marginalization, irrelevant/poor educational contentⁱⁱ and/or conflicting social or economic obligationsⁱⁱⁱ are the main reasons children are unable to access school, or they drop out of school. According to the International Institute for

Educational Planning, UNESCO factors such as parental education and literacy; proximity to school; gender; indirect discrimination based on ethnicity, religion and culture; and not teaching in the language students speak at home also attribute to exclusion.^{iv}

The World Bank Group has identified seven key challenges that influenced growth in education systems in sub-Saharan Africa. These include:

- Population growth
- Rapid growth of the school-age population
- Slow growth of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita
- High income inequality
- High poverty levels
- High linguistic diversity
- Frequent conflict^v

Conflict and post-conflict situations, as well as natural disasters (e.g., typhoons, floods, earthquakes), are also temporary or long-term reasons for not attending school. The pandemic that swept the world in 2020 is further compounding barriers to educational access. Millions more children have been confined to their homes, are deprived of education.

Because failure to attend school often leads to entrenchment in a lifetime of poverty, many developing countries have set national priorities to universalize basic education. And yet despite this intent to expand access to education, many governments still do not recognize — let alone support — alternative education programs.^{vi}

The Way It's Always Been Done

Conventional education systems characterized by their daytime sessions, residence- and age-based enrollments, teacher-delivered standards for national curricula, six-year learning cycle (in the case of primary level), and their almost exclusive focus on urban and future-oriented knowledge and cognitive competencies is only one way to provide education in many developing countries. Schools organized this way have a harder time meeting the needs of marginalized populations and understanding the constraints of their living condition.^{vii}

Education for All's main agenda is to provide quality basic education to children who have been excluded or marginalized from the education system. In the years following the 1990 Education for All (EFA) Convocation in Jomtien, Thailand, many countries realized that they need to consider alternative forms of improving access to quality education and meeting education reform goals.^{viii} This realization steered many developing countries toward designing and implementing a new approach characterized by diversification of the delivery system. This requires understanding and flexibility to respond to the needs of children and youth in diverse ecosystems.

What Is Diversification?

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) report on Diversifying Educational Delivery

Systems says diversification is:

- Recognizing multiple and diverse learning needs
- Having multiple arrangements and technologies to create learning experiences
- Creating a system-wide framework for accrediting learning outcomes

The report underscores the importance of determining appropriate modes of educational provision and how to manage them. It also emphasizes the move away from supply-led thinking to demand-led thinking, and from education to learning, which in turn requires a decentralized, creative decision-making approach and the institutional framework to make it work.^{ix}

Another report compiled by ADEA recommends that diversification would require a total overhaul in our thinking on how education should be delivered. The paper underscores the shift from “getting the learners to come to school or class to getting education to reach the learners,” i.e., from “supply-driven to demand driven.”^x

This means taking education to the indigenous populations of the Amazon and Equatorial Forest of DRC to the Tuareg nomads of the Sahara Desert and to the fishing communities of the remote islands of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

Diversification also calls for delivery approaches that would require:

- Creating a flexible timetable
- Using multiple shifts to reach the widest possible audience
- Recruiting local teachers (both qualified and those who do not meet all the criteria to teach)
- Introducing multigrade classes to make optimum use of teachers
- Introducing multimedia instruction
- Establishing community schools
- Encouraging the private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious organizations, civic society organizations and individuals to participate in the provision of education



Success Story

For instance, in Colombia in the 1960s and '70s, isolated rural areas with few students had poor access to formal learning until multi-grade classes were introduced under the program called Escuela Nueva. Prior to that, more than 50% of rural children between the ages of 7 and 9 never attended school. Escuela Nueva is a rural school in which one or two teachers offer all five years of primary education in one or two multigrade classrooms. By 1989, with the support of the World Bank, the program expanded to 17,948 schools with 800,000 students.^{xii}

The USAID-supported Time to Learn program implemented by Education Development Center (EDC) in collaboration with the Ministry of General Education of supported activities in 2,000 community schools in Zambia during 2012-17. According to EDC, community schools were and are an important part of the government's plan to achieve universal primary education by 2030. These are expected to serve about 30% of all the schools in the country and 25% of the primary school population. According to EDC, community schools are characterized by enrolling more than 60 students hosted in temporary facilities, volunteer teachers, and cater for the needs of the marginalized children.^{xiii}

Solutions of Substance

Diversifying the delivery system means implementing regular programs and Accelerated Learning Programs (ALPs) and developing high-standard curricular content relevant and responsive to students' needs. Moreover, diversification calls for customization to different settings (e.g., rural and urban; nomadic and sedentary; religious and secular). Diversification also should be open to using local language as a medium of instruction. USAID

programming in Northern Nigeria (NEI Plus and ECR) and Afghanistan (APEP) provided opportunities to hundreds of thousands of children through the Accelerated Learning Program, to help them acquire literacy and math and life skills. A substantial number of children who benefited from these programs went on to join formal education settings.

Diversification also means that accreditation must include the whole spectrum of accreditation bodies, from the most formal to the most informal.^{xiii} Thus, the need for an overall quality assurance system that enables diverse forms of provision to grow — but within strict criteria for access and quality — should also be recognized and strictly enforced.^{xiv} This means that diversification should happen **within an integrated education system and not outside its framework.**^{xv} This means that there's a whole system that recognizes and supports this delivery mechanism.

Using technology is also another approach toward diversifying the delivery system. This is particularly true when, according to UNESCO, more than 1.5 billion students and youth across the planet are or have been affected by school and university closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.^{xvi} This calls for another approach of education delivery where both digital and non-digital platforms are used. Many countries are now using radio, TV and other digital platforms (including social media) to deliver education. It is also worthy to note and explore options of blended learning — a model of teaching that incorporates both in-person and virtual teaching.

Integrating subjects such as literacy, math, and social and natural sciences in purely religious schools is also a way to boost enrollment. These integrated religious schools (Integrated Islammiyah schools or Madrassas) are very popular in countries such as Nigeria and Pakistan. There is also ongoing research into how to make optimum use of Affordable Non-Public School (ANPS).



Photo by: Erick Gibson

Other education policies promoting equal access to basic education for the poor by making cash transfers to encourage attendance or putting more money into public education are beneficial.^{xvii} A case in point is WB Better Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA) programming in Nigeria.^{xviii} It is aimed at increasing equitable access for out-of-school children and improving literacy in focus states, and strengthening accountability for results in basic education in Nigeria.

Ideas Are Spreading

Education is diversifying even in developed economies such as Europe to address quality issues. There is growing peer-to-peer learning, increasing use of bite-sized learning in workplace and personal environments as well as in an increase of home-schooling. Blended learning is a main trend as well as customized, individualized learning.^{xix}

In sub-Saharan Africa, students do not have the luxury to wait for schools to be built in order to begin or continue their educations. They can't wait for each potential teacher to receive a teaching certificate (although this is preferable) before they begin teaching. Quality in education is important, but so is time. We must use the best tools we can find right now, and not put off the task of teaching children until every supply is in place and every box is checked.

Trying to match the educational model in the U.S. or Europe to Sub-Saharan Africa or any other community in the world, is, frankly, unrealistic, unnecessary and misguided. The best products are made with local solutions. Our educational system can take ideas from others — this is how we learn and grow. But the foundation of the program must be based on what we have to work with right here, in front of us, now. It can't be something we wait to find, or wait for people to give us. It must be community-based in order to function and thrive.

Optimizing educational resources means doing the best with what you have to work with. Children could learn just as well — and perhaps better — under the shade of a tree than in a shiny new classroom.

If the world is our school and our community understands this, we can succeed.

ENDNOTES

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Semere Solomon, the Senior Director of the Africa Regional Center at Creative Associates International, has more than 25 years of experience in the education and sustainable development programming, with an emphasis on education policy and systems development.

His effective leadership and program management skills in the fields of program design, planning, service delivery, system strengthening and research have been grounded in the coordination of complex programs for USAID, the United Nations and as a Director General of Planning and Development in the Ministry of Education in his native Eritrea. Having mission experience in Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA and Asia, Semere is published and designs and implements education projects across several continents.

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