

**Open and Distance Education as a tool for sustainable development: Some reflections on
Ethiopian experiences
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Introduction

This article deliberates the notion of open and distance education as a means of securing development in Ethiopia from the capability approach point of view, which underpins a developmental approach to education. The historical background of distance education in Ethiopia is discussed, in addition to the connection between distance education and development and the role of open and distance education in recruiting skilled manpower to meet the global economic challenges.

Conceptual Framework

Development is a notion that signifies a change in the economic and social systems of countries, where the wellbeing of their peoples is enhanced at a definite point. Sustainable development involves the lively progression at inter-temporal and inter-personal space. The concept of sustainable development, which was first popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in its 1987 report entitled “Our Common Future”, appears to demonstrate the necessity of global change in handling and understanding the feature of human development. According to the Commission in the report sustainable development is encapsulated as “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

The commission intends to seek a pragmatic means of dealing with the environmental and developmental discrepancies through critical deliberation of the environmental and developmental aspects by involving international stakeholders and increasing the awareness of individuals and communities to address the discrepancies (UNESCO, 2003).

Sustainable development is explained on the basis of social, environmental and economic sustainability, considering the better life and livelihood for the present and future generations. Imbalance handling of the three issues may lead to a state of unstable equilibrium, which may stand later against the principles of sustainable development, and hence sustainable development could be defined as the act of carrying out economic ventures, and using resources without compromising the wellbeing of the future generations.

Development, from the capability approach, could be stipulated in terms of achieving value by the people, which may vary from one individual to another like being well fed, and nourished, achieving a sense of self-satisfaction and self-respect, being literate, being able to do things better, or earn a better living. Therefore, according to the capability approach, there is an alternation from securing economic growth as ends in themselves to people’s growth and better human conditions. Thus development is perceived as the procedure of having genuine independence that the people need. Education, in this larger sense of term, serves as a tool

people can use to achieve the level of freedom that they feel is intrinsically valuable, as well as achieving rudimentary levels of knowledge acquisition (e.g., beginning with literacy and basic arithmetic), which serves as a functional key to greater educational development. Therefore, capability theory views education and development as systems of promoting the abilities of people, which would ultimately affect their economic enhancement. So the paper attempts to assess the role open and distance education could play in enhancing development through capability approach.

Kinds of open and distance education

Taye and Tesfaye (2012) stipulate that there are various kinds of open and distance education modes, which could be stated in the following manner:

1. *Correspondence systems (the most common in Africa)*
2. *Educational television and radio systems use various delivery technologies. Such system is practical in our country by the Ministry of Education. But it is beyond the reach of private educational institutions at least at present.*
3. *Multimedia systems encompass text, audio, video, and computer-based materials, and usually some face-to-face learner support delivered to both individuals and groups.*
4. *Internet-based systems*

Open and Distance education and Development in Ethiopia

Human capital is a determining factor in ensuring economic development because carrying out economic ventures may be successful with the security of a huge number of human capital, which encompasses the notion of formal education, on-job training and learning embodied in the workforce. According to Dreze and Sen (1995), education paves a way for people to see their choices of personal development, who may contribute substantially in the industrialization process and economic enhancement. On top of that, educated individuals could be privileged with profound knowledge of health and sanitation and exercising freedom, and educated societies might get an advantage of getting out of hunger, bettering economic productiveness, raising awareness about environment and empowering women. Therefore, providing education to all citizens in various ways, including through open and distance education secures human capital development, which impacts the growth of GNP and the country's wealth, which Ethiopia needs to adopt too.

Open and distance education contributes to the economic growth by addressing the scarcity of skilled workforce, providing accessibility, equity and continuity in education, and enhancing technical skills and teachers' capacity, which could lead to the increase of productive working force in a certain country.

In an Ethiopian context, it is evident that Ethiopia has been progressing well in terms of economic growth. According to the report of the world bank (2015), The economy has experienced strong and broad based growth over the past decade, averaging 10.8% per year in 2003/04 - 2013/14 compared to the regional average of 5.0%. Part of this development is educational, particularly the progressive expansion of higher education institutions in the country, though it appears that much is to be done with the quality delivery of higher education. Alongside the expansion of the higher education institutions, the emergence of the open and distance education has been assistance in the increasing tertiary enrollment rate (Tesfaye 2002).

Moreover, the expansion of open and distance education in Ethiopia has been not only the responsibility of the government but also the private sectors. Tesfaye (2002) citing KUAWAB (1999) stipulates that it was the Kenyan based British Tutorial that started distance education in a correspondence mode in 1967, but the internal distance education center was the Alpha International, which set up the national vocational correspondence enterprise in 1988/89.

Open and Distance Education at a tertiary level became functional with the opening of private colleges and universities in Ethiopia, and these educational centers are offering diploma and degree programs. Nevertheless, at the master's level, the distance education is provided to the public in collaboration with the foreign higher education institutions. For example, St. Mary's university offers Master's program in collaboration with the Indra Gandhi Open University and Institute of Leadership and Management in collaboration with the University of Greenwich, UK.

Reflections

Concerning the impact of open and distance education on development in Ethiopia, it may be of paramount importance in looking at the collaboration and cooperation between open and distance education and governmental and non-governmental agencies, and It is helpful to scrutinize the impact these educational initiatives have had on the development and growth of individuals, and how such growth has translated into an advantage and have reshaped and improved individuals' immediate lives and their communities.

It appears that open and distance education has had an influence not only on individual life but also the community and national plans in Ethiopia. For instance, a significant number of competent teachers have been recruited in distance mode learning in Ethiopia (Tesfaye 2002). On top of that, effective citizens have been trained in various fields, including business, social sciences, economics etc in Ethiopia, who are anticipated to meet the high demand of qualified man power in the development ventures the country is carrying out.

Needless to say that the era of technology and communication has brought the world into one small village, and open and distance education could play a role in narrowing the discrepancy in information technology between the developing and developed communities. Moreover, information technology, in which message is maintained and knowledge gained, may lay a

ground for the programs of open and distance education to run smooth, and may pave a way to the growth of global community, in which people now have access to many different forms and channels of communication including e-mail, e-learning, tele- and video-conferencing, virtual learning, and virtual libraries, to name just some of the more common applications.

This technological communication has appeared to affect Ethiopia too, as there is a social transformation going on currently because individuals are making endeavors tremendously to be part of the emerging learning society that came into being by the open learning initiatives (Tesfaye 2002). This seems to indicate that there is a transformation from the exclusive, closed system mode of “privileged” access to education, towards a more inclusive educational model, which supports and is reflective of UNESCO’s goal of Education For All for the 21st Century.

Furthermore, open and distance education has been playing a crucial role in bridging the gap between education and the world of work in Ethiopia, which has become the worst due to the emergence of new technologies in every sphere of profession, by opening a gate for people to learn and acquire skills wherever and whenever they are, including basic literacy and arithmetic skills, and earning university degrees in various skills such as governance and management, life skills, agriculture etc. on top of that, people who have not had a chance to pursue their education due to work, low economic status etc have been privileged to learn through the distance mode of learning (Tesfaye 2002).

Eventually, it may be concluded that open and distance education has played a pivotal role in producing skilled manpower in quantity and quality in Ethiopia (Tesfaye 2002) which may be interpreted in economic terms that there has been growth and development of local and national economies, as the contribution of the graduates of the distance education program, is substantial not only in terms of meeting the demands of the country of skilled man labor, but also running their own small business as managers.

Recommendations

Based on the theoretical aspects and extensive literature about open and distance education, the paper adopts the following recommendations:

- Considering the role education can play in registering remarkable economic achievement, the government of Ethiopia should encourage more private open and distance education institutions, and should reconsider its action of closing the faculties of law and teacher education in private colleges and universities, as they are part of the indicators of development.
- The government of Ethiopia should serve as a bridge between open and distance education institutions and private and public organizations so that distance education learners can implement their knowledge and change the theories into practice.
- The government should encourage both the public and private open and distance education institutions to conduct needs analysis to detect the fields of study that are

demanding in Ethiopia today, so that the contribution of the distance education towards development becomes substantial.

- The government should provide open and distance education institutions with access to human capacity building, relief from tax duties on textbooks as there is high socioeconomic demand for highly trained human resources with wider ranges of skills and competencies that exist presently and the time to come.
- Literature shows that the major challenge of the expansion of open and distance education is administrative rather than technical, so that government of Ethiopia should take its role in resolving this issue by establishing a committee that follows the distance education program, promoting the advantages of open and distance education and assisting the private open and distance education institutions not only financially but in terms of enhancing human capacity and professional development.

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