Book Review - African Youth on the Information Highway: Participation and Leadership in Community Development

Editors: Osita Ogbu and Paschal Mihyo
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Since the 1970s, most African countries have been experiencing serious socio-economic problems. These include the general underdevelopment of rural areas with its attendant economic gap between urban and rural centres; high poverty levels, (both urban and rural); high population growth rates that inevitably exert excessive pressure on the education and health systems; inadequate education and health services, intolerably high illiteracy rates, and high incidence of disease. Other problems include youth unemployment attributable to, among other factors, declining employment opportunities for young people and, more recently, the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The declining economies and the concomitant shrinking formal labour markets mean that high proportions of the active labour force are engaged in the informal sector. In some countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, the informal sector accounts for up to 80 per cent of gross domestic product. This phenomenon has contributed to the development of enterprise and entrepreneurship training programmes aimed at equipping young people with the necessary attitudes, knowledge and skills to participate more productively in the informal labour market.

It is in this context that the above-mentioned book has been reviewed. It is a product of a workshop on the proposed Youth Leadership Program for Information and Communication Technologies and Community Development in Africa (ALPID), supported by the Eastern and Southern African regional office of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), in Nairobi, Kenya.

The ALPID project, designed for implementation as a sub-theme of the Accra Initiative of the IDRC, was launched in 1996 as an international effort to empower communities in Sub-Saharan Africa to apply ICTs in their socio-economic development programmes. It aims to promote equitable, sustainable and self-directed development in disadvantaged and rural communities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The book has six chapters and opens with an informative foreword by the IDRC Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa. It is followed by a detailed and focused executive summary, which gives an overview of the whole project

and summaries the key issues addressed by the workshop and its recommendations.

Chapter 1 gives a detailed description of the ALPID program, including its underlying principles, specific objectives, justification, and critical areas and needs in community development. This chapter also identifies priority areas for intervention (health, small and medium-sized enterprises, and land use and environmental management). ALPID's target countries, its target group, how the program will be executed, training strategies, program activities and conditions for program sustainability are also part of Chapter 1.

The technical feasibility of implementing ALPID, which, among other things, examines the information age and global trends, connectivity and alternative technologies, policy and regulatory constraints are discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter also discusses information technology in East Africa, intervention programs to disseminate trade information, and application of ICTs among the key areas.

Chapter 3 focuses on the implementation of ALPID in Kenya in terms of availability of skilled youth labour for ALPID, requisite technical and social skills, the nature and relevance of the social structures, and appropriate dissemination strategies. Equally important, this chapter outlines adult learning methods and identifies key stakeholders in the youth to adult transfer of knowledge program, and offers a brief but useful discussion on coordination modalities.

In its discussion of the challenges and possibilities in implementing ALPID in Uganda, Chapter 4 describes the ICT infrastructure development and prospects and the status of information systems in that country. This chapter also describes a hypothetical coordination centre in East Africa, to emphasize the importance of coordination, assessment and evaluation mechanisms.

Chapter 5 is short and titled: "Electronic Networking in Uganda: Building Local Support Capacity Through Youth Volunteers." It describes the East Africa Help Desk, a project supported by USAID, intended to help build the capacity of networks of East African countries. Its activities include provision of technical, management and information training and on going support.

Conclusions and Recommendations on the implementation of ALPID in East Africa constitute Chapter 6, which is essentially an outline of the implementation plans suggested by the workshop participants.

The main chapters are well researched and written in plain language, which make the book interesting to read. The book is a useful companion to those who are interested in youth development studies and those involved or interested in the provision of education to rural and disadvantaged communities. It shows the potential of information and telecommunication technologies in increasing access to education for rural communities in Africa.

The book is important in many respects. First, as noted in its foreword, it shows IDRC's greater involvement in the application of ICT in community development. Second, it signifies welcome changes in the strategies for involving the youth in socio-economic development especially in rural areas. Third, the book shows the potential of ICT in the education of rural communities, even in countries whose ICT infrastructure is comparatively underdeveloped. Fourth, the ALPID program provides a model for developing similar programs not only in African countries, but also in other geographical regions experiencing similar socio-economic problems.

Fifth, it is evident from the list of authors that there is expertise in Africa which can be utilised for the information revolution to transform the developing countries as it has done in industrialised nations. Lastly, the areas targeted for intervention are critical to the socio-economic development of African countries.

However, there are a few concerns one can raise about the book. It would have been good to have a chapter on Nigeria, which is among the initial target countries for the ALPID program. This would have offered useful comparisons between East Africa and West Africa, albeit in a small way.

Similarly, some readers would probably wish that the book were located in a broader and general context of ICT application in rural communities in Africa (e.g., telecentres/Community Learning Centres) one of the most interesting ones being the Nakaseke Multipurpose Community Telecentre in Uganda. An overview of such case studies could have offered useful background regarding ICT and its contribution to socio-economic development in comparatively weak economies. Second, while acknowledging the potential role of university graduates in implementing the program, the role of less educated youth could have been made more explicit. The ICT based community learning centres in Zambia show that even illiterates and less educated young people are resourceful and can be used to transfer knowledge.

These concerns, notwithstanding, the book is an invaluable contribution to the application of ICT in community development and the active involvement of young people in this area. It is a book one would be proud to have on one's bookshelf.