

“Why Poor People Remain Poor”:
The need and relevance of an educational Network website in Cameroon
By Ajaga Nji, Ph.D.

Professor University of Dschang, Cameroon, Africa
P.O. Box 138, Dschang, Cameroon
Tel. (237) 7772 01 49/ 9458 4830/ (237) 3345 1176 Fax 3345 19 55
Email: ajaga_nji@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper answers the question “WHY POOR PEOPLE REMAIN POOR” by positing that the fundamental problem of poverty lies in illiteracy, ignorance, exclusion and insulation from science and technology. The basic premise of the paper is that limited access to education, denial of opportunity, low capacity levels in science, technology and engineering, the absence of political will and commitment are the main factors that contribute to keep poor people poor in Cameroon in particular and the CEMAC region in general. In spite of the rich endowments in natural resources, biodiversity, and culture, the North-West Province is not capturing its fair share of the national cake because of limited access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This is compounded by low participation of the private sector in the generation, development, dissemination and utilization of knowledge. The design and launch of an educational network will contribute to market the North-West Province and put the Province in an advantaged position to increase its scientific power and technological capacity in an era of rapid globalization and social change.

Introduction

Cameroon is a country of opportunities and endowed with a rich diverse and plentiful diversity of natural and human resources. Yet, not all its Provinces have benefited in equal measure from the rich national basket. Thus, the North-West Province is sometimes referred to as the “No Water Province”, the “Strikers Province”, the “Petition Writers Province” or the “Ph.D.-Put Him Down Province”. A number of factors contribute to coin these negative connotations:

- More than three quarters of the Province has access to pipe borne water, although this is a national problem which affects other provinces as well;
- The North-West Province was declared the province with the highest level of HIV infections by the Cameroon Ministry of Health, although the national incidence of HIV/AIDS is not the lowest in Africa;
- North-West People are dedicated petition writers. Not against what is wrong, but most of the time against who is wrong with the purpose of earning the bushman’s “ phd” (pull him down);
- Bamenda came on the news sometime in April 2008 as the Cameroon city with a growing population of unemployed youth who are making a living as scammers –cheating and stealing through the internet;

Why poor people in the North-West Province remain poor

The North-West province prides itself as one of the most forward-looking provinces of Cameroon with creative, imaginative and industrious minds contributing to the wealth creation and knowledge generation of their country. But we are still poor and are likely to remain poor poverty is a dangerous and stubborn canker in our society. Its roots can be found, in the gaps, weaknesses and incongruities in our national educational system. Although necessity is said to be 'the mother of invention', Cameroon in particular and the CEMAC region in general has not transformed its challenges into opportunities to make education the cornerstone of its development strategy.

My research and work over the last quarter of a century on poverty (Nji, 1981; 2004; 2007) show that the problems of persistent poverty and destitution are not due to the lack of technology, nor the absence of capital but the absence of an enabling environment that allows Cameroonians to unleash their latent untapped energies to contribute efficiently to the construction of a Knowledge Society in an era of increasing competition and globalization.

This stifling environment is caused by the following:

1. **Social exclusion and denial opportunity.** Children from poor backgrounds are denied access and excluded from enjoying the benefits of education for economic reasons (e.g. inability to pay the cost of education); social exclusion (e.g. children from families without much political or social power); cultural bias (e.g. culture and tradition that gives preference to boys and men over girls and women in education), geographical factors (e.g. families in urban areas have access to more and better educational opportunities than those from rural backgrounds), and political myopia (poor policies promote mediocrity and political favours at the expense of meritocracy, competence and talent);
2. **Weak educational institutions** which fail to provide quality and relevant education to children in initial training, and continuous and lifelong learning especially for adult learners.
3. Perpetuation of **the circulation of the elite** which allows only privileged individuals, their families and friends to have selective enjoyment of the benefits of the society in education, training, commerce, science, technology and improvement of their livelihoods.
4. **Lack of political will and commitment** to remove people out of poverty in a sustainable way. Unfortunately, this negating situation is sustained by institutionalized corruption and embezzlement of public funds, poor governance, and undemocratic principles.

Internet actively contributes to break down all these barriers through the development of indigenous capacity in Science, Technology and Innovation (STI). That is why STI capacity building in resource-poor countries has been receiving high profile attention in international circles. For example, the Blair Commission Report (2005)) and the UN Task Force Report (World Bank, 2007) on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) argue that “building STI capacity should be elevated from a missing or peripheral element of the development agenda to an essential component of every country’s strategy for reducing poverty. This will lead to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and produce more knowledge-intensive, higher value added goods and services” (Juma, 2007:7).

An educational website links scientists, academics and students to their peers by building professional connections and communication networks. The educational network in the North-West Province will need network infrastructure at the campus, provincial, national, regional and Pan-African levels to be effective and efficient.

The advantages of the educational network being launched today in Tadkon Credit Union Hall are numerous, such as the capacity to:

1. **Create awareness** of existing educational institutions and their curricular in the NW Province;
2. **Inform potential stakeholders** (students, teachers, parents, government agencies, dealers in educational technologies and potential employers);
3. **Facilitate communication** between students, teachers and educational administrators;
4. **Enhance the use of fibre networks** by students and their teachers for research, education, employment and service to the community;
5. **Promote information exchange and sharing** among academics, researchers, students and educational leaders as well as linking dispersed campuses;
6. **Provide an inventory for educational policy** on efficient mechanisms to increase access, quality, relevance and management of education;
7. **Showcase educational institutions** and create a harmonious environment for competition, diversity of educational provision and greater choice for students, parents and sponsors;
8. **Build data bases** and contribute to the provision of scientific, technological and scholarly information on-line (including courses), to facilitate teaching, learning, research and moral education;
9. **Increase access** to local, national, regional and international e-content through digital depositories or libraries;

10. **Create the environment** for diversification of education provision and lifelong learning.
11. **Provide opportunities** for knowledge generation, development, dissemination and utilization;
12. **Facilitate access** of the North-West Province into the global economy

Internet in Africa was born in the universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s by champions of innovative scientists in countries such as Zambia, Mozambique, Senegal and Uganda through experimentation with e-mail systems (AAU, 2005). Therefore, it will be safe to postulate that the quality and sustainability of the ***Mawum Educational Website*** will depend on the participation and involvement of the higher education sector in this initiative because the building of scientific capacity lies in the universities. Higher education is also the level *par excellence*, for the generation, diffusion and utilization of scientific and technological knowledge

No society has developed without investing heavily in its people. Therefore, educational institutions are the engines of knowledge, growth and development in all societies. The CEMAC region cannot “leap frog” into the Technological Age without substantial and steady investment in its human resource. Although the 12 main advantages of educational networks mentioned above primarily benefit educational institutions themselves, it is expected that a website such as the one being launched here today will contribute directly or indirectly to finding solutions to national problems or needs.

In the case of Cameroon and the CEMAC region an educational network should enable users to network, share and collectively find solutions to:

- The chronic problem of *poverty and social exclusion*;
- Our perennial and growing *energy crisis*;
- The complex problem of *skills development* and skills upgrading;
- *Brain drain* how to transform it into *brain circulation*;
- The complex problems of *poor people's diseases* such as malaria, measles and tuberculosis;
- Pervasive *traditional agricultural* systems
- The *inertia and unresponsiveness* that characterize our public institutions
- Our stubborn system of *injustices, lack of the rule of law, Corruption, bribery and embezzlement* of public funds;

STI and the Tiger Economies

The now widely told story of the development experience of the “Tiger Economies” of East Asia is a shining example of the strong and sustained impact of relevant education on the construction of a knowledge society. The tantalizing experience of Korea, Singapore and now China tells us how (1) focusing on

building the skills of the labour force through education at all levels; (2) creating incentives and public institutions for discovery and adaptation of foreign technology for national needs; (3) effective use of foreign investment to create technological spillovers; and, (4) building on focused projects that support the technology needs of industry, can fight poverty in a positive, effective, efficient and sustainable way.

The miracle growth of the Republic of Korea is further attributed to the fact that Korea, a small country (98,000 km²) which is half the size of Cameroon (172,000 km²), with a population of 46 million inhabitants which is three times the population of Cameroon (15 million), has always relied on the role of education in developing their own individual economies and that of the nation. This is based on the strong belief that "education is the only means to upgrade one's social status" (Sonu, 2007:10). Furthermore, a number of factors have worked to crystalize Korea's miraculous development:

- Korea's capacity for *technology imitation*;
- Building *STI capacity around specific problems*
- Design of *educational systems* that are *responsive* to the research and human capital needs of the private sector;
- The presence of an *enabling policy environment* characterized by political will, commitment and dedicated policy makers.

The establishment of the Mawum Holdings Educational Network creates fertile ground for Cameroon and the CEMAC region to take a page from the Chinese development notebook in the area for example of technology transfer (<http://www.ft.com/cm/s/3c788d028-648e-11db21-0000770e2340.html>), the development of local skills, sharing of intellectual property rights, joint ventures with local firms on technology adaptation projects, all in return for the abundance of natural resource exports on the continent (Watkins, et al., 2007) .

In regions with small countries and weak economies such as the CEMAC region, to base the development of *all* STI on the strengths of individual countries will be like swimming upstream. Rather, it will be more beneficial for the region and easier to strive to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and sustainable development by developing cooperation ties between member countries through the creation of centres of excellence and platforms for shared learning and education, research, technological development such as a website.

Mawum Website and Open and Distance Learning

Finally, "ICTS can help expand primary, secondary and tertiary education by facilitating distance learning, offering remote access to educational resources and enabling other solutions", (Juma, 2007). The effectiveness of a distance education programme depends on the **relevance** and **quality** of its contents to

the learner. Therefore the Mawum Educational website holds the potential to encourage learners and teachers to communicate more, learn more, be more creative and imaginative, significantly improve their skills and communities and allow students, teachers, employers and civil society to maintain sustained partnerships, linkages, dialogue and cooperation. (Tait, 1997).

Conclusion

The fight against poverty and misery in the 21st century cannot be won without massive investments, and the political will and commitment required to build an educational system that can compete and win in a rapidly globalizing world economy. Cooperation and collaboration are needed at the individual and collective, institutional and regional levels to surmount a number of challenges to scientific, technological and engineering education in Cameroon and the CEMAC Sub-region. An educational website which serves as a marketplace is a timely answer.

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