

ON BOARD A PLATFORM FOR SIMILAR OBJECTIVES: The Massive ICT Role Camara Education Plays in the Ethiopian Education System

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Background

This article summarizes the recent ICT development trend in education in Ethiopia and the roles played by non-government organizations. The strategy is to start ICT in scalable manner taking into account the local conditions. It also points out the use of technology to go from simple to more complex ones.

Ethiopia enjoys continued independence by defending itself from foreign aggression and colonization; and yet for centuries on end, it has fallen victim to one deadliest colonizer, poverty. Poverty has remained cancerous colonizer, eating the country's flesh, sucking its blood, penetrating, cracking its bones and depleting its national strength. Poverty has reached a point of saturation.

It is on the recognition of this fact, this truth that has driven Ethiopia to look incessantly for a way out of this entanglement. The search in depth by ranks and files for the experiences of countries which fifty years back were in similar situation and today economically their populations are ranked among developed countries continued to this day.

This search has brought Ethiopia to explore the potentials of ICT, which can become the magic spell to do away with poverty and bring about prosperity and development within a short time.

Although the Ministry of Education had a long history in the use of radio and terrestrial television as a teaching and learning tools, it had been struggling to overcome the gross limitations of those services.

Current Information and Communication Technology Landscape

His Excellency, Ato Meles Zenawi, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia said this:

*“The first mental block that we had to cross was the view that ICT is for the rich, but it became clear that quality of education was likely to be substandard for a long period of time unless we could come up with short cut, and people seemed to suggest that ICT could provide that short cut. **Because we are poor, we can't afford not to use ICT.**”* (The bold and underline is mine)

And because Ethiopia is a poor and economically a weak country, it cannot afford to take a normal pace in integrating ICT; but rather take quick and aggressive measures. The Prime Minister's words are indicant of a strong government commitment for the development of ICT infrastructure in the country.

With greater than 8000km of fiber optic cable, marine cable connection through Port Sudan and plan to upgrade the overall telecom infrastructure, Ethiopia's ICT landscape has undergone a remarkable transformation during the past couple of years. A number of significant innovations in telecommunication services have evoked the introduction of cellular phones, FM radios, satellite TV and finally the Internet.

The Ministry of Education has taken a number of initiatives to bring about equitable quality education:

Heavy and continuous teacher upgrading and improving skill development scheme started recently should be continued.

Illustrative text-books have been produced based on student centered approach.

The secondary school satellite television broadcast was launched seven years ago by doing away all the inequities of old terrestrial television. In line with the 2009 national satellite television program evaluation, some new features including Ethiopian sign language to address the hearing disadvantaged students, are reflected in the newly produced programs that have been transmitted since September 2011.

This project has been envisaged since its inception to go on phase basis in both content and technology with priorities of needs and conditions in the education sector.

The content approach was to address first with subjects that Ethiopian students have difficulty with, subjects like the Sciences, Mathematics, Language and Ethics. Later on to include the other subjects.

The technological strategy is to start with radio and television and as we go along with these media we introduce and go in full swing with computer assisted education. Each technology has its major role to play. The use of ICT is economical and time saving to impart equitable training services to all teachers scattered all over the country and yet our teachers have remained for long unfriendly to technology due to the fact that technology assisted teaching had not been fully deployed in their school days. Using ICT can help teachers acquire more professional skill and move towards student centred teaching and learning.

It has been then necessary to start with the simple push-button technology and move to more complex technology of using the computer, the internet, the e-mail that call for computer literacy and information literacy in order to access information, knowledge and skills.

Along with the strong effort of MOE to bring on board the new ICTs into the education system, the positive roles that non government organizations play cannot be denied.

With the opening of 33 universities massive ICT work is underway both at the public and private sector. A lot of effort has been made by the Ministry of Education in implementing ICT in the education system IT curriculum in place.

Some 196 preparatory schools (grades 11 and 12) had started using internet with computers with the support of UNDP as pilot project.

The Ethio-Indian pilot distance education on Education and Medicine via satellite connection has already been launched by which universities in Ethiopia are connected with the respective universities in India.

Camara Education Joins Hands with the Ministry of Education

Educational challenges are running threads and ICT is the right timely weapon against these challenges. The race in the use of ICT for education has just begun. In joining this race, Ethiopia will not be a loser, but as it goes deep into ICT, its rewards will come in ten-folds. The harvest will be in a bucket rather than in a thimble, if we work closely together against our common agenda of getting rid-off poverty with ICT. This needs closer relationship with countries and organization which have rewarding ICT experiences.

The Ministry of Education needs much more support from highly experienced organizations and countries the world over to come on board MOE's ICT spaceship for quality education.

Equitable Quality Education

It is in view of this national port of call that the Ministry of Education entered an agreement with Camara Education Ltd. Ethiopia in order to address the dire need of bringing equitable quality education through a multi-modal education delivery mode in a short period.

Equitable service brings about addressing those who have remained forgotten for decades and centuries on end in the education system, the rural majority and girls. Walking across cultures, more often than not the victims of social injustice are women and the rural majority. Camara's one major objective is to the address the same "disadvantaged" sector of the society in Ireland and a given country.

Computer Illiteracy

Upgrading the skills of teacher is also a cross cutting concern for both the Ministry of Education and Camara Education. Training offered to develop the skill of using computer is one major task that awaits the Ministry of Education and Camara Education.

Camara by providing computers at a very low cost students and teachers or schools which had no opportunity of getting the computers before can now have them in schools. To this end in the Eth11 shipment 450 computers and Eth12 610 computers have been distributed in 41 schools around Addis Ababa. Eth13 shipment is to be distributed in 46 schools in Amhara region. Along with this distributions basic computer skill will be provided as it had been done in Addis.

Information Illiteracy

One of the strategies of the Ministry of Education is to make education more relevant by designing a student centered approach to education. The training to be offered in understanding and using different application is of great importance. Of the many methods, one method is edutainment, which Camara Education is more tuned to this along with its other potentials for ICT education. To bring these philosophies into play

the necessary provisions should be provided. As computers have to go in every school, application with student and teacher friendly software called ubuntu, which Camara has opted for and worked on it to make education more palatable in order to ebb these educational challenges.

In less than a year, Camara Education has done a significant work with the three shipments of computers, software application training with international trainers from Dublin followed by our local trainers conducted two training sessions for all of the schools that received the computers.

The contribution of our local volunteers is immense that they have almost mastered the inspection of the computers with the subsequent loading of the application software after they took the training offered.

In spite of these positive efforts, unforeseen and exiting challenges should be addressed with all speed.

1. Experience sharing venues in available and affordable means should be conducted
2. Signing a contractual agreement alone by itself is not enough unless otherwise followed by a sort of project charter that avoids individualistic interpretation of signed agreement.
3. With a heavy background of “unfriendliness” to technology and the fear of the unknown that the technology will replace the teachers is hovering in some quarters, consultative workshops should be conducted twice a year.
4. Selection criteria of a “disadvantaged” school takes any form unless otherwise some sort of general yardstick is set up and decided collectively, be it at the center or the regional level.
5. Empathy to social context, the school calendar, the technology friendly level, the awareness level should be revisited before making a move or decision.
6. Strong, unregimented but coordinated command ship at macro level lends itself to micro level in order to sing the same song.
7. Understanding the clients and treating them in such a friendly manner that builds the desire to come again should be developed both at macro and micro level.
8. Since schools are mushrooming in hundreds every year addressing these schools is quite a challenge both on the recipient and supporting end. These call for:
 - priority be given in establishing of sub-hubs,
 - build up dependable volunteers in quantity and quality,
 - strong and timely vetting with local conditions in view, fast and efficient inspection,
 - earlier readiness to come up with furnished computer labs,
 - qualitative and massive training,
 - arranging training halls,
 - taking into consideration the level of technical skill of trainees the accommodation of induction should been envisaged,
 - system of the reduction of not working computers from the source,
 - maintaining the quality and level of computers, before shipment,
 - the timely shipment of the computers,
 - scheduled effective distribution of computers,

- how often and can a technical staff go into different sub-hubs to conduct vetting and maintenance,
 - when and who conducts the monitoring and evaluation, etc.
9. The other point for consideration is the kind of strategy that should be on the ground as we move away from the central hub to larger regions. Our first experience was in the region where our central hub is situated. Any problem encountered by the users during or after the distribution of the computers can be fixed easily as the factor of distance is insignificant. Although this first shipment is apparently simple as there was much time spent for preparation, it has lent itself with invaluable experience. Yet as we go farther away from the central hub the problems will be aggravated as many schools are new to computers alike their Addis counterparts; as such a strong down-to-earth strategy plan should be drawn. One way out of this problem is way ahead of the first shipment a sub hub should be established with volunteers recruited based on their inclination to new technology. They should be equipped with strong IT knowledge and skill. We cannot render effective service and win the heart of our potential clients if we dwell much too much to do everything from the center.

Yes, true, challenges come in many forms and shapes. Unless otherwise each little challenge is not dealt with on time, it will not be easy to remove it after it has grown up big and solidified.

The discussion conducted by Philip McAllister with the Ethiopian team has set a momentum towards understanding the modes operandi of Camara Education.

The work trip of Dr. Orliath McCaul, the Director for Camara Africa, to Ethiopia from October 18th to October 19th, 2011 was instrumental in removing differences and bringing into light the true philosophy Camara Education. It has been refreshing and an insight to a way forward with Camara Education along with the plan for 2012.

During her trip to Ethiopia, Dr. Orliath McCaul also met His Excellency, Ato Demeke Makonnen, the Minister of Education of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, a haunch supporter for the development of ICT in the education system, has expressed his support for the role Camara Education is playing in the education system and there is a massive ICT work to be carried out ahead along with Camara Education.

With openness and no hidden agenda, we can do miracles and reach the summit of excellence and accumulate strength to do away with poverty.

Strong planning with its subsequent follow up is a key ingredient for laying down a foundation today in order to see a bright tomorrow and should become a habit of the individual, be it at home or office.

Roles to be played by individuals should be open to all and this helps one to see what supports one can get from the other as one moves along a bumpy road ahead to wage a little fight against a little problem in order to uproot and write an epitaph for the mother problem.

Advocates for the Disadvantaged and the Safe Planet Earth

These efforts of Camara Education will duplicate themselves in thousands and millions as we go from region to region. The call is urgent for ICT is not only a means to solve the issue of poverty but also a means of saving the destruction of our planet earth.

What Camara is doing today alone will be immense tomorrow and beyond control, unless otherwise those who advocate for the right of the disadvantage should join this noble cause. By joining efforts you can protect your agenda from going down the drain. Joining hands make problems simple. By networking efforts, what is heavy for one person can be a feather weight for all and a quick response to those who are struggling for the survival today.

*Let's put together our heads, hearts and hands,
To let ICT evict poverty from our lands,
Let's waltz and tango with ICT,
The result of our wedlock, the world to see.*

*From: It Always Takes You and Me To Tango,
By Demissew Bekele, 2006*

The call is urgent for ICT is not only a weapon to solve the issue of poverty but also a means to save our planet earth from its destruction; and this is not an agenda of one, but that of all.

*No matter how you try willy-nilly,
Without a mountain there is no valley.
It always takes you and me to tango,
Indeed this is the name of game, bingo!!!*

*From: It Always Takes You and Me To Tango,
By Demissew Bekele, 2006*

Two in one is beautiful. Solving a difficult problem on time and at a time with two heads is just like hitting the last nail on the coffin. Thus, two in one is the name of the game!!!

*In my long journey ahead, I need you,
It's as well true that you need me too.
If success be the outcome of our effort,
You need me in full, not as an escort.*

*From: It Always Takes You and Me To Tango,
By Demissew Bekele, 2006*

We are now engaged in the Armageddon of poverty, and lo behold with our concerted effort and sharpened ICT weapon the victory will be ours and our spaceship, the earth, will be a healthy and peaceful place to live in.

Stand up and join forces that promote your cause today, for tomorrow will be too late!!!