

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

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BENIN

ICTS IN EDUCATION IN BENIN: ELUSION AND THE LIGHT OF HOPE



CréACTION BENIN

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Introduction

The era of people sitting around a tree for endless discussions is now past. Now is the time of screens, paper and multimedia, with the internet as a cornerstone. This is a fast world, full of images, texts and sounds, moving as fast as light. However, to keep pace with that light, the true light, is not an easy task. We mean the light which can help get rid of ignorance; the light that brings in changes in businesses, moving them to develop.

To ignore new technology is to be a misfit in today's world. It is to lag behind a story that humankind has made up. We spoke to Cedric, a student in sociology. A writer and poet, Cedric got a scholarship for Brussels as a writer-in-residence. One of the requirements was that he had to use a computer with an internet connection while in residence. Too bad, he knew nothing about computers, even though he attended computer classes when he was in high school. Basically, the courses were theoretical and insubstantial.

Meanwhile, his colleagues, African or European residents, were making good use of the machine, proudly showing documents they had produced in a relatively short time.

Ironically, Cedric is from Benin, a country where computer and internet classes in a number of schools are compulsory, and the use of technology is encouraged and advertised by the media. However, learners continue to be introduced to technology "in theory", rather than practically. The government exercises no control over information and communications technology (ICT) training programmes. The education system continues to be run with flaws, and there is almost no curriculum guidance.

The French political document, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1793, states in Article 3: "All men are equal by nature and before the law." This right is inalienable. But culturally, this right is problematic. People in all continents have not received the same education, do not have the same history; therefore, they do not have the same opportunities. In this context, even Cedric was lucky.

The challenge of ICTs in education in Benin

The national strategy for ICTs in Benin is well defined. By 2025, Benin must become "the digital district of Africa". This strategy has two essential components. The first component relates to the development of e-business. The second component takes into account e-government and e-education. The aim is to connect all government and educational institutions in order to boost development at the national level.

Unfortunately, in practice, this is more difficult. The ICT learning programme is not yet widespread in schools. Therefore, the digital gap is getting wider. The rate of internet use is still very low in Benin. Among over 200 students surveyed, only 3% have a computer and 15% use the internet for their studies. The reasons given are threefold. The first is economic. The students do not have the money to buy computers. The purchasing power of these learners does not allow them to acquire these materials. The second reason relates to the teaching system. There are few teachers and lecturers who can teach computer classes. Mostly they are individuals who have attended introductory courses in computers and the internet, and have only partial knowledge of the discipline.

The last reason relates to the difficulties in learning how to use technology well – which comes from using technology regularly.

Because of these factors, we can say that access to knowledge is unevenly shared.

Sad fate, sad situation for Cedric, a young student of eighteen, registered for his first year in sociology and anthropology at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin, truly immersed in this reality. Lured by the attractive and misleading advertisements of ICTs in education in one of the computer schools in the city, Cedric realised he had been duped. What motivated Cedric to register at that school was the computer classes it claimed it taught there. To have a good command of typing, being able to use the internet, chat, find information, was a dream for the young learner, a step towards reality.

But by the end of the year, the only things he knew were the definitions of the different parts of a computer: screen, keyboard, mouse, monitor, hard

disk, computer. Generally, the computers he used were first-generation computers (Pentium 1) or second-generation (Pentium 2), largely because they were less expensive to buy. But these computers are subject to untimely breakdowns and malfunctions during training programmes. The Pentium 3s that are found in some schools are considered luxury items, sophisticated objects placed on desks and covered up for protection.

Another serious problem is the instability of electricity supply. There are frequent power cuts. When they occur, classes automatically stop, given the absence of generators. Classrooms are also not air-conditioned. And up to eight students cluster around a single computer to work. The time spent at the keyboard was considered short. "The class was a boiler and everyone was fighting to breathe easily," Cedric told us in our interview with him.

Given the lack of laws and regulations, educational institutions lure young pupils and students to their classes through what amounts to false advertising. The practical arrangements put in place in these schools are outdated and do not facilitate access to quality training. Unfortunately, this sorry and even illegal situation continues, and is legitimised by a number of school authorities who have the protection of a few political leaders.

As a result, despite attending the school, Cedric has not yet discovered the advantages and benefits of using a computer and the internet. The students know nothing about discussion groups or social networking. Cedric has just a poor idea of these tools, which many students of his age in other parts of the world manipulate skilfully.

The right to access the internet

My mother often says, "The five fingers are not equal, yet they are all together." The realities of Benin are not those of Togo, neither those of the Ivory Coast nor of France. The needs expressed in these countries reflect the existing emergencies there. In Benin, education is an "emergency" and the state is well positioned to help Cedric recover his right to access the internet, one that allows him to access information.

The educational system in Benin, despite the noticeable progress made since the *Conférence Nationale des Forces Vives de la Nation* (National Conference of Active Forces of the Nation) in 1990 has faltered. Several ongoing reforms do not appear to be working, especially those related to new teaching programmes. One is the teaching of ICTs. Unfortunately, many schools in Benin have no electricity, no telephone lines. The cost of hardware is still too high given the budget allocated to each

school for operating expenses. This all contributes to the failure of ICT projects in the educational arena such as the GLOBE Project in 1996, NTIC-EDUC in 2000 and the Project for Introducing Computers in Schools (PIES), based in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education.

A reluctance is also observed in the school system where teachers who are computer illiterate do not want to admit it, because they are afraid of losing their jobs. Following our investigations, it turned out that many educators do not want to be taught about computers in their schools at risk of being treated as if they belong in the backwaters of this changing century. Some argue that they are no longer able to learn anything. Why?

They refuse to face the new difficulties a computer introduces into their lives. This narrow-minded attitude reduces the chances of introducing these tools into school programmes.

Cedric lives this policy failure.

Conclusions

The growing development of ICTs has profoundly changed people's ways of thinking and acting in the community. ICTs contribute to the strengthening of social ties. Basic computer literacy and a good command of IT applications are essential to getting to know the realities of the changing world.

Unfortunately, Western countries have a clear lead over the Southern ones. The result is a digital divide which is a key factor of underdevelopment. ICT development initiatives and forums are set up by multinational corporations, political leaders and members of civil society in an effort to bridge the divide – regional and international summits such as the World Summit on the Information Society being one such effort.

In Benin, efforts to promote an enabling environment for the use of ICTs continue. The state's regulatory framework, including tax exemptions for hardware, and the numerous ICT projects, including an increase in the number of cybercafés in major cities, help to some degree. Schools and universities have been gradually introducing computer and internet training programmes in their classes.

However, real difficulties remain: the availability of computer hardware, the training and capacity of teachers who are responsible for teaching the discipline, financial difficulties relating to the management of computer rooms. As a result, like the computers they use, the training of students is still not reliable. The courses are unregulated and inconsistent. There is a mismatch between the training promised and the course content in the programmes. Teachers are not evaluated by the

state. The student performance officially recorded is not credible.

Yet the need for training remains high. It is only by meeting this demand properly that we can build an “Emerging Benin” where socioeconomic and intellectual development is supported by ICTs.

Action steps

- The state should back up its ICT policies and visions by supporting ICT education programmes in schools and universities.
- State strategies should involve both national and international NGOs.
- Computer education should be integrated into all public schools and universities.
- Computer classes should be part of free education at primary school.
- Computer courses should be a separate subject

in official exams – it should no longer be an optional subject.

- Courses should be run enabling teachers to build their ICT capacity.
- The state should gradually build rooms specifically designed for computer classes.
- All schools and universities with computers should be connected to the internet.

Action steps for directors and heads of schools

- The heads of schools should develop objective criteria in the selection of teachers to ensure quality training for learners.
- The internet should be used for knowledge sharing among teachers, including courses and curricula.
- New computer hardware should be installed to facilitate effective learning. ■

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2011 Report

www.GISWatch.org

