

Open and Distance Education for the Marginalized (by UNESCO Bangkok, ICT in Education)



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To various degrees, marginalization and vulnerability exist almost everywhere in the world. In some contexts these groups are in smaller numbers, while in others, the concept of being “marginalized” becomes more controversial, as they may constitute most of the population, depending on the context. The consequent question arises as to who and where these marginalized groups are, why they are marginalized, and how their challenges can be addressed in an inclusive and efficient way. Evaluating some of the national policies and data available on the vulnerable and marginalized, five categories of marginalization emerge:

- gender-related (girls)
 - culture-related (castes, tribes, religious groups)
 - location-related (refugees, conflict-affected areas, child soldiers, nomads)
 - poverty-related (working children, single mothers), as well as
 - special groups (disabled children, children living with HIV and AIDS, orphans)
- (UNESCO, 2010, p. 5).

Starting with [the Jomtien Declaration](#) in 1990, UNESCO had committed to serving the underprivileged groups, including “the poor; street and working children; rural and remote populations; nomads and migrant workers; indigenous peoples; ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities; refugees; those displaced by war; and people under occupation.” Ten years later, in line with this pledge, [the Dakar Framework for Action](#) committed to serving the “children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities.” Most recently, through the promise of the [Education for All](#) Movement as well as the [Millennium Development Goals](#), the governments together with the UN and other international organizations have been planning and implementing concrete policies and programmes to improve access to and quality of education, ensure girls’ inclusion in schools, and reaching the marginalized. Today, we can say through evidence that gender parity in primary and secondary education has drastically improved (UNESCO, 2014). However, as we come closer to the deadline date for

these goals, we can see that the most marginalized communities are still denied the opportunities for education (UNESCO, 2014).

With the endless array of educational opportunities available and the advent of educational technologies, these groups could or should be put at an even higher priority, receiving timely, relevant and quality education. In response to different needs, technologies can serve various types of learners, cutting the physical and mental distance between the learner and knowledge acquirement. Open and distance education (ODL) is one of the educational delivery modes that has been increasingly explored for the marginalized. This new approach to education frees learners from the constraints of time and space with a more flexible approach to learning (Okebukola, 2013). Students engaging in ODL can simultaneously work or carry out their daily responsibilities. The three main characteristics of open education are: “flexibility, technology-mediation and learner control”, making this approach free and with an array of choices of what, where and how to learn (Okebukola, 2013). It does not only broaden access, but can also improve the quality of education, collaboration, and autonomy of the students. With technology-enabled ODL, the change from the traditional classroom to a virtual one can become almost unnoticeable.

However, some of the challenges remain in providing open and distance education to the marginalized. When the marginalized groups rarely have access to education, it’s not surprising that they have no access to the latest educational technology. The second wave of digital gap, or knowledge gap caused by unequal access to digital resources, becomes a bigger challenge. Despite this hindrance and lack of inclusion of the marginalized groups in advanced technologies as well as education, many innovative projects around the world have utilized the available technology in smart and efficient ways, with a focus on the lower-end devices, such as radio, mobile phones, or television.

The more useful and successful technologies for the marginalized could instead utilize the “lower-end” gadgets, reaching those who do not have access to tablets, smart phones, or laptops. For example, radio is still utilized as the main source of information, reaching the many rural or hard-to-reach areas. The UNESCO [World Radio Day](#) (13 February) celebrates this timeless technological tool, highlighting its unique power to connect people and information throughout every corner of the globe. Radio can allow our listeners to not only learn information, but also develop and share it.

As for the mobile phones and their unique as well as effective utilization in some parts of the world, a programme in Pakistan that uses basic cell phones, the [Bunyard Mobile-Based Post-Literacy Programme](#), focused on supporting young rural women through materials sent to their cell phones. Moreover, additional messages on social issues, value of education, and then environment are also provided. Similarly, the project in Afghanistan, [Using Mobile Phones to Accelerate Literacy Education and Empower Afghan Women](#), provided literacy lessons through the use of mobile phones, as well as information on human rights, health, nutrition, banking, and more. It also aimed to inspire motivation among marginalized girls and women. The [Ustad Mobile](#) programme in Afghanistan, addresses the issue of the access to education for women in challenging settings. It provides literacy lessons for simple phones, with audio and video learning tools through an open source application, which contains local content, and can be easily maintained by the users.

In reference to the usage of TVs for education, such projects as the [Development of Community Television in Rio de Janeiro](#) in Brazil provides educational and cultural programmes for the low-income and disadvantaged communities, shares community news and events, allows for local debates, notifies the community of important services, such as vaccination opportunities, and more. Since the content of this channel is the most important

aspect of the project, non-governmental organisations, communication students from the city's universities, and local residents who show interest in the local media are involved in its development. Additionally, training for youth and adults is provided.

As the abovementioned programmes have tried to reach the vulnerable and marginalized populations, and although open and distance education can help communities learn independently, the human aspect of these initiatives is crucial. Frequently, learners need reminders, motivation and adequate time management skills in order to continuously learn and utilize the online platforms. Many of the distance education programmes, thus, include actual teachers, or facilitators that can respond to and remind their students to partake in a discussion, provide feedback, or answer questions. Some projects also utilize community centers or libraries for community needs and educational provision or support. IREX's Beyond Access programme, [Libraries for Development in Peru](#), focus on libraries as knowledge, culture, and information centers for the communities. It aims at decreasing the digital and information gaps in the country. While located in remote areas, these libraries can help address the educational and technological needs of their communities, becoming centers for technological innovation as well as learning. Another Beyond Access project, [Powering Economic Opportunity in Davao City](#) in the Philippines, also utilizes libraries as places for information as well as digital literacy and skills training. Additionally, this project aims to support the Philippines E-Government Plan and the Philippine Digital Strategy, which focus on providing access to ICTs, especially for the marginalized.

In addition to the learner side of online and distance education, a recent UNESCO project in partnership with Chung-Dahm Learning Inc., "Updating UNESCO Collection of Digital Resources for Teaching and Learning: Supporting the Effective ICT-pedagogy Integration for Teachers and Teacher Educators Programme", aims to provide teachers and teacher educators with a new collection of open and free digital contents that are developed in line with the core curriculum standards for secondary education in Mathematics and Science in the Asia Pacific region. These can be accessed both online (downloadable from the web), as well as offline (CD ROM or portable drive), depending on the ICT infrastructure in the least developed countries, which are the focus of this project. This is an effort to strengthen teachers' professional development in the area of innovative and effective ICT-Pedagogy integration, as well as make this digital content widely available to countries that face infrastructure limitations. The package will be available for use soon.

With the evidence of radio, mobile phone and TV effectiveness as educational resources in many rural, disadvantaged and remote contexts, the opportunities for innovative, relevant and effective programmes can be endless. Once the cloak of the latest gadget is taken off, one can see that it is not the technology in the end that changes the learning outcomes, or provides a boost in motivation. It is the competent teachers, technical support, strong leadership, and the adequate identification of the most usable technology that has contextualized, appropriate and useful content for its end users. As [the 2010 Education for All Global Monitoring Report on](#)

Reaching the Marginalized points out, there is still a long road ahead of us to reach the marginalized. “Unless special efforts are urgently taken to extend educational opportunities to the marginalized, the poorest countries may take several generations to achieve universal completion of primary and lower secondary education as well as universal youth literacy...” (UNESCO, 2014, p. 41).

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