

Aligning Sustainable Development Goal 4 with Provision of Distance Learning through Library Perspective: The Case of the Open University of Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development goal number four (SDG 4) is the education goal whose main focus is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities. In that perspective, its focus on the promotion of lifelong learning augurs well with the mainstay of distance education in any country. This linkage is anchored on the quality, timely provision of knowledge through libraries that are entrusted with the role of searching, acquiring, processing and make access to various distance learners knowledge in various forms for their continuous learning and attaining various qualifications. Sustainable development goal number four (SDG 4) lies at the centre of all other goals as it entails transforming societies globally into learned, aware, and one that can cope with changes at economic, political economic and social levels. Impliedly, education for all that is the main proponent of this goal must be achieved using all avenues possible including open distance learning for those that cannot afford it through other conventional education systems. Libraries are the lifeline of open and distance learning. Over years, especially with the fast-changing technologies and more emphasis on e-learning of which open distance learning has also adopted quickly, the role of library has had challenges in terms of the visibility on services it provides, availability of adequate resources to cope with such changes and, skilled staff to offer library services with e-learning base. This paper explores issues related to the role of library services in supporting promotion of lifelong education through distance education systems and as articulated in the sustainable development goal four (4). The paper examines ongoing global as well as national efforts of libraries in supporting distance education in the modern era and through the existing technologies. The linkage of the three variables, i.e. SDG4, distance education and library services is, without any doubt, of critical importance for the continuous growth and improvement of learning through distance education.

Keyword: Sustainable Development Goal 4, Libraries, Open and Distance Learning, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is act of development that takes into consideration a balanced approach to human development now and in future. It focuses on sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the economy and society depend. According to Carley and Ian (1993), sustainable development requires an immense store of scientific knowledge. Libraries are the centre of knowledge creation, deposit and dissemination. Over years, efforts in the development of libraries have focused on this role. Provision of education through distance learning requires ample, organized and readily availability of knowledge. According to UNESCO (2019) success in the implementation of SDG is also determined by variables such as;

- Government efforts to publicly promote the right to information;
- Citizens' awareness of their legal right to information and their ability to utilize it effectively;
- The capacity of public bodies to provide information upon request by the public."

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) lies at the centre of all other SDG goals as it entails transforming societies globally into learned, aware, and one that can cope with changes at economic, political economic and social levels (Uvalić-Trumbić & Daniel (2016). Impliedly, education for all, that is the main proponent of this goal, must be achieved using all avenues possible including; open distance learning for those that cannot afford it through other conventional education systems. As noted by Mcharazo and Olden, (2000), distance education must not be seen as a cheap alternative to conventional education, but it does offer economies of scale in education and learning chain. Libraries are the lifeline of open and distance learning. Over years, especially with the fast changing technologies and more emphasis on e-learning of which open distance learning has also adopted quickly, the role of library has had challenges in terms of its visibility on services it provides, availability of adequate resources to cope with such changes and, skilled staff to offer library services with e-learning base. This paper explores issues related to the role of library services in supporting promotion of lifelong education through distance education systems and as articulated in the sustainable development goal four (4). The paper explores ongoing global as well national efforts of libraries in supporting distance education in the modern era and through the existing technologies. The linkage of the three variables, i.e. SDG4, distance education and library services is, without any doubt, of critical importance for the continuous growth and improvement of learning through distance education.

Literature Review

Focus of Sustainable Development Goal 4

What is vivid in the 21st century is that, sustainable development is based on access to information and knowledge. Organised access to information can be efficiently be done by libraries. According to NgianLek (2017) libraries have critical roles to play in many, if not all of the SDG goals. He associated such success with how libraries have helped to improve goal 4 in raising the quality of education by enabling the skills of reading in young children, and how libraries help in bringing about gender equality in goal 5 by creating safe places for girls and boys to learn in common spaces and to live together harmoniously. Like their counterparts, African libraries have recognized the key role of libraries in achieving sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Knowledge as a resource need to be generated, organized and disseminated for various purposes including development and most importantly inclusive and sustainable development. Over years and in the current fast changing and shifting development paradigms, the role of information has become more pertinent. State of the art technologies that are also changing so fast and becoming more complex and friendly in some instances have made access to various sources of information fast and costs effective.

Huwiler (2016) is of the view that based on the trend of increasing distance education offerings, libraries need to re-evaluate their role and recognize that the traditional division between on-campus students and distance students is disappearing. Increasingly what we are envisioned today is the role that technology is taking in delivering distance learning programmes. Sustainable development goal number four (SDG 4) is the education goal whose main focus is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities. It focuses on the following:

- i. Ensuring lifelong learning opportunities for all, from early childhood to adult education;
- ii. Ensuring equity, inclusion and gender equality;
- iii. Ensuring effective learning and the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills and competencies; and
- iv. Ensuring the relevance of learning, in terms of vocational and technical skills for decent work as well as for global citizenship in a plural and interconnected world. (GCE, 2020)

Focus number one of the SDG 4, i.e. ensuring lifelong learning opportunities for all from early childhood to adult education align itself well with what open and distance education focuses on. According to Lane (2017), open education, in the form of resources and practices are both contributors to SDG4. But also focus number three of SDG4 i.e. ensuring effective learning and the acquisition of

relevant knowledge, skills and competences align itself with the role libraries in the provision of quality learning resources for efficient and effective learning process. On the other hand, the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) has noted that target outcome number seven of the SDG4 whose emphasis is on the promotion of education for sustainable development and global citizenship aims to make sure that by 2030, all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. This include education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

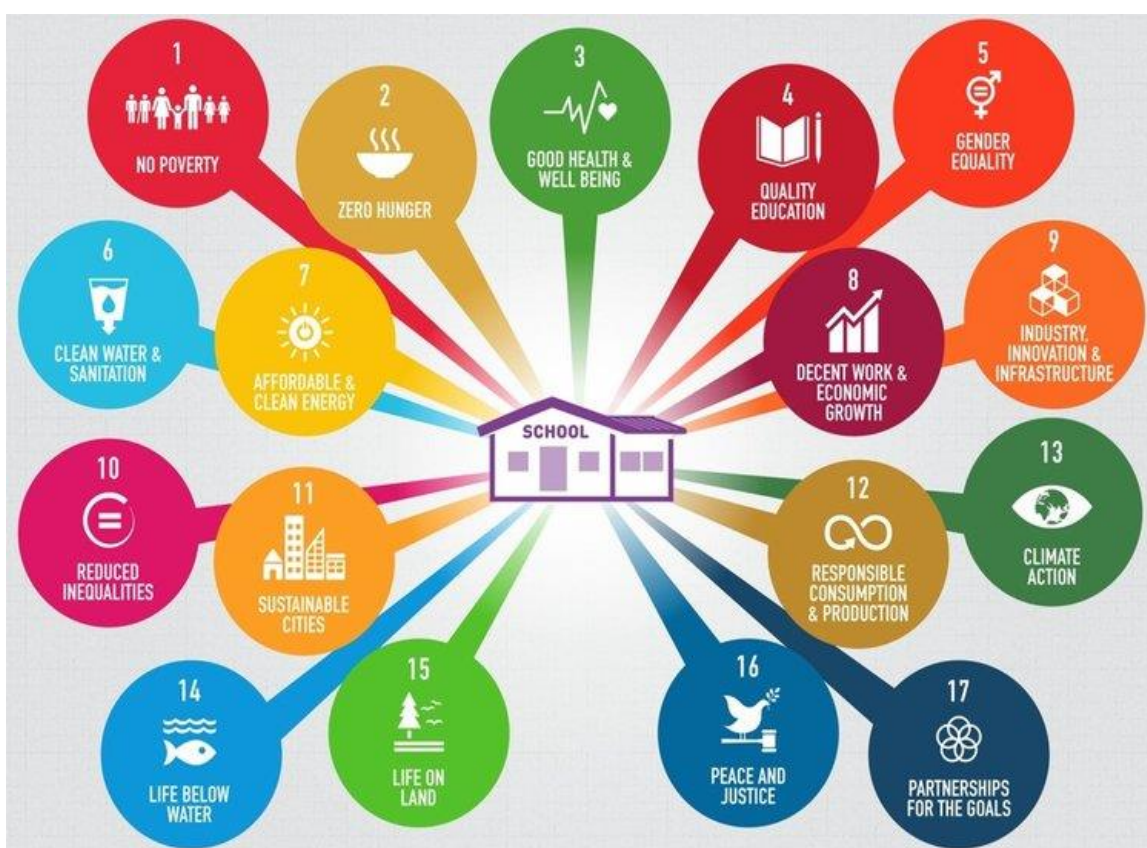


Figure 1: Effects of SDG 4 on human sustainable life

Open and Distance Learning

Open and distance education is now a global trend that through it majority are being empowered with knowledge and skills which otherwise they would have no opportunity to access. According to UNESCO (2002), the globalization of distance education provides many opportunities for developing countries for the realization of their education system-wide goals. Two main factors have led to an explosion of interest in distance learning. These are:

- i. the growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining; and

- ii. the techno-logical advances that have made it possible to teach more and more subject at a distance.

The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) which works towards bringing accessible, quality education to all through online, open and distance learning provides advocacy and leadership around the advancement of online, open and distance learning. According to ICED, SDG4 is part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries to recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve global environment (GCE, 2015). To do this pro-actively distance education is seen as core for far reaching to the majority of global citizens who cannot afford other means of accessing education opportunities.

Role of Library in an Open and Distance Learning in Supporting implementation of SDG4

Sustainable Development Goal 4 focus on the promotion of lifelong learning augurs well with the mainstay of distance education in any country. This linkage is anchored on the quality, timely provision of knowledge through libraries that are entrusted with the role of searching, acquiring, processing and make access to various distance learners knowledge in various forms for their continuous learning and attaining various qualifications. It must be emphasized that SDG 4 lies at the centre of all other goals as it entails transforming societies globally into learned, aware, and one that can cope with changes at economic, political economic and social levels. Impliedly, education for all that is the main proponent of this goal must be achieved using all avenues possible including open distance learning for those that cannot afford it through other conventional education systems. On the other hand, according to (Priti and Jibril, 2018), in Botswana, for example and is support of Goal 4: Quality education, some Public Libraries provide homework assistance to children to build strong educational foundation. Libraries are the lifeline of open and distance learning. Over years, especially with the fast changing technologies and more emphasis on e-learning of which open distance learning has also adopted quickly, the role of library has had challenges in terms of its visibility on services it provides, availability of adequate resources to cope with such changes and, skilled staff to offer library services with e-learning base. According to Corbert and Brown (2015) libraries and librarians have always been focused on providing resources and helping

expand learners' skills and knowledge. However, as online education become mainstream, the focus now shifts to how librarians and libraries will continue to meet their mission, goals and objectives providing electronic resources to meet the growing demands coming from distance education students along with serving in-house or on-site learners.

The Case Study of the Open University of Tanzania

This paper draws its data from a case study of the Open University of Tanzania. Through this case study, key library staffs were interviewed including; the director, all heads of departments and key staff that are responsible for managing various key sections like databases, e-information. The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) is a fully fledged, autonomous and accredited public University, established by an Act of Parliament Number 17 of 1992 (OUT, 2018). The Open University of Tanzania offers certificate, diploma, degree and postgraduate courses through the open and distance learning system which includes various means of communication such as; face-to-face, broadcasting, telecasting, correspondence, seminars, e-learning as well as a blended mode which is a combination of two or more means of communication (OUT, 2018). OUT operates through a network of about 30 Regional Centres; 10 Coordinating Centres, of which one is in Zanzibar and one in Pemba; two are in Kenya (Egerton and Njoro), one is in Rwanda (Kibungo), one in Namibia and one in Uganda. Other OUT Internal Coordination Centres are the African Council for Distance Education – Technical Collaboration Committee (ACDE TCC), the Centre for Economics and Community Economic Development (CECED) and the SADC Centre of Specialization in Teacher Education (SADC ODL COSTECH).

OUT has also 69 Study Centres spread throughout the United Republic of Tanzania (OUT, 2018). In addition, the University provides an enabling environment for integrated continuous learning for students and its staff. It is also mostly relying on Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) for teaching and learning (OUT, 2018). The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) has a long history and experience in offering distance learning over years. Its experience has been improving over years and coping with changes nationally and globally. Equally, its library services have been growing to cope with demands from both teaching staff as well as students. In terms of technology adoption and adaptation of new technologies, these have been integrated into the University programmes, thus giving the library an equal growth in terms of quality services. In terms of technological advance, according to Mcharazo and Olden (1995) OUT has had a forward plan to make ICT one of the main hub of its service delivery, implying that plans to use ICT has been a long term vision of the University.

Functions of the OUT Library

In terms of public service delivery, the OUT library offers its services through Online Public Service Catalogue (OPAC) which is also linked to other online web based programs like GOOGLE. This, enable students to access open sources which allows students to access and read the full text of the available documents. The OUT operates library services at it's headquarter based in Dar es Salaam and ten Regional Centers. Acquisition is done centrally. The library also maintains central databases of its various information resources. Manual access is still used at a low scale at OUT HQ but mostly in the regional centers. The library has been increasing its subscriptions to print journals and online journals. From 2013, the OUT library started the system of institutional repository which has assisted the library to get access to full texts of thesis/dissertations, and other relevant publications that supports e-learning. Open course wares are linked through OUT library webpage.

Currently, OUT library has computers labs which students use to search materials which are connected through wireless technologies. Online resources-library webpage has various resources i.e. online journals, books, dissertations/thesis which are in repository area. Lectures are also available through library webpage. Students get acquainted on the use of these facilities during orientation week. Databases that can be accessed through OUT library include; EBSCORE, INARI, EMERALD, AGORA, GOALI etc

Aligning Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Role of Library in Enhancing Open and Distance Learning

As was pointed in the introduction part, SDGs anchor on availability of organized knowledge to allow all other actors to act decisively. For example, libraries offer a wide range of products and services that promote the achievement of each and every one of the SDGs. From promoting literacy, to offering free access to information, libraries are safe, welcoming spaces, at the heart of communities. They advance digital inclusion through access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT), internet connection and skills. They promote innovation, creativity and access to the world's knowledge for current and future generations. (IFLA's, 2003). According to Finch (2018) SDG 4 libraries are at the heart of schools, universities and colleges in every country around the world. All libraries support literacy programmes, provide a safe space for learning, and support researchers to access, apply and reuse research and data to create new knowledge. Hands-on computer classes, after-school support, and programmes addressing subject areas with high failure rates are just a few examples of how libraries respond to local needs and take action to improve education. Libraries also act as facilitators in their communities, setting up local learning centres to support learning.

Conclusion

Libraries is an important player in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in terms of making sure that the SDGs are understood and the various players have a good knowledge of what is entailed and how should be implemented. Furthermore, SDG 4 is paramount in the sense that it touches on the heart of human development which is quality education whereby libraries are its cornerstone. For all the SDGs to be achieved, SDG 4 as an overarching goal will have to be aligned and intertwined in such a way that its effect is included in the implementation of all goals and its outputs and outcome can be assessed just like any other input. The growth of library services at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) has vividly shows how distance education has been systematically supported by library services. The investment that OUT has done to library has enabled it to cope with ever changing needs brought about by fast technological changes. The experience of libraries in general and OUT library in specific is a good reason on enabling so as to support individual citizens, community institutions, and businesses improve livelihoods and improve quality of life which the highest aim of sustainable development as supported by Goal number four on quality education.

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