

Digital Bridges: Developing Countries in the Knowledge Economy

(Book Review)

Reviewer:

Steve McCarty

Professor, Kagawa Junior College, Japan
President, World Association for Online Education
steve_mc@kagawa-jc.ac.jp

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Digital Bridges: Developing Countries in the Knowledge Economy
Author: John Senyo Afele
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From a village in rural Ghana, Dr. John Afele has studied in Belgium, Japan and Canada. He has traveled further on development missions and for conferences, for instance as a Board member of Global Knowledge for Development. Serving as a North-South bridge person in worldwide knowledge networks through the Internet also qualifies him for the book's theme. His focus is on innovative ways to bridge the global digital divide and to empower local economies with global knowledge. He pursues every possible way that the least fortunate could be assisted more effectively by development grants, intellectualizing indigenous knowledge, mobilizing Africans of the Diaspora and others concerned with development. The reader can see issues through indigenous eyes where actual conditions, needs and possible solutions can be more clearly assessed than through the intermediation of international development agencies. A social dimension of the book is evident in having extensive Acknowledgements near the beginning of the book, plus an emphasis on networks and partnerships as well as ideas and technologies.

Content-wise, the book is classified as economic aspects of knowledge management, IT and telecommunication for developing countries. Dr. Afele also details agricultural issues, indigenous practices both ingenious and inefficient, along with scientific suggestions based on his Doctoral training. His attitude is that Africans in particular need food but also IT, as knowledge is urgently needed for self-sufficiency and economic development. Drawing from his experiences with international development organizations, his critiques are understated in keeping with his humanistic ethics. Although not mentioned in the book, he remains constructive despite many of his own ideas having been adopted without reward or attribution by prominent international projects. Thus it is important that the non-Western author's knowledge, sometimes his only wealth, is not siphoned off. In any event the value of this book is not in sound-bite conclusions but rather in the stance and detailed prescriptions for greater effectiveness of development initiatives.

That being said, the following brief account of the chapters will include some quotations to convey the author's approach. Each chapter has numerous references, often available online with URLs provided. In the Preface, Dr. Afele writes that "[b]uilding a knowledge community necessitates that talents and ideas are identified; creativity is nourished, capitalized, and translated into tangible services and products for the primary impact zone" (p. viii). This is in contrast, as he explains later, with local talents serving as cheap labor for products made only for export. In Chapter I. Introduction, he argues "for customized IT systems that are realistic, given the infrastructure, social, and inherent intellectual capital of the impact communities" (p. 16), which he details in the following chapters.

Chapter II. Standards of Knowledge Communities briefly establishes the terrain of current events and debates in the development field, and the expectations that global standards could be applied to transitional and developing countries. Chapter III. Nurturing Knowledge Communities uses the African corn industry as an example and addresses some of the daunting problems of the region such as HIV/AIDS from a scientific viewpoint. While he advocates expert systems, his focus is on empowering people for self-help, local talents and facilitators thereof. He acknowledges ingenuity gaps which justify importing state-of-the-art technologies from IT-rich countries, but tailored to the indigenous social system by local facilitators. Development projects are usually dispensed through governments and trickle down if at all through elite classes. Dr. Afele would have all local families record their life details and changes for online knowledge systems designed to assist them better with their input.

Chapter IV. Splicing Modern Knowledge and Ancestral Wisdom aims to preserve and capitalize upon indigenous cultural traditions in adopting new technologies. Since the colonial era, educational systems in Africa have not incorporated local knowledge, engendering technical and intellectual dependency rather than self-reliance. The continent has been subject to predations of cultural goods as well as diminution of traditions. So while readers may wish to hear more of what or how ancestral wisdom remains, Dr. Afele seems more intent on finding every way that the well-being of the poorest humans could be enhanced by modern knowledge without attendant sacrifice of cultural identity.

Chapter V. Digital Bridges and Digital Opportunities for Developing Nations is the longest chapter and does treat developing regions besides Africa, such as Southeast Asia. Taking the global digital divide largely as a given, the chapter is full of ideas on how state-of-the-art technologies could be applied to specific needs. Dr. Afele cites current events and actual activities of development-related networks, both of which should be familiar to many readers of this review, to exhibit problems and limitations of mostly top-down approaches. His prescriptions are wide-ranging and refreshing in treating local realities with bottom-up solutions. He shows acute concern for changing brain drain to brain gain, for education and HRD, for the plight of women whose talents could enhance national development, for health and security, for youth groups and governance. To the rather accusing question of food or IT for Africa, he wants both but calmly shows how IT could assist in enhancing local ingenuity, how modern knowledge could lead to greater agricultural self-sufficiency.

Chapter VI. Globalization and Frameworks for Digital Opportunities looks for ways to improve the functioning of international development institutions, mobilizing public opinion, and spreading awareness of global issues. Chapter VII. Capitalizing the Knowledge Economy of Developing Nations focuses on the need for fund-raising to help break the cycle of poverty. He also points out how, in many developing countries, national budgets are skewed to military spending, often to defend a corrupt regime, so more benevolent democratic leadership could free local budgets to be allocated more constructively. He often tries to include Africans of the Diaspora abroad, even African-Americans, in the search for solutions by joining people together. A deeper leitmotif of the book is that such people, to which readers might see the author as a leader, are the most salient bridges to connect global knowledge to local needs.

Chapter VIII. Preservation of Cultural Identity and Preventing Piracy of Indigenous Intellectual Properties is the briefest of the main chapters. In keeping with Dr. Afele's focus on the positive, he holds problems with piracy of his own ideas in abeyance and mainly appeals for more awareness, inasmuch as intellectual leaders of developing countries are already at a disadvantage in actualizing their visions. He does caution that even digital bridges could "encourage external agents to siphon off valuable knowledge from the poor communities, just as natural resources such as minerals and forest products, and local arts and crafts were subjected to" (p. 194). He focuses more attention, however, on specific remedies such as Websites in local languages to help bring about the best of both worlds.

In Chapter IX. Postlude, Dr. Afele concludes that "digital opportunities could be deduced from the information and knowledge needs of these economies, such as the need for better access to telecommunication infrastructure, tools, knowledge networks and communities of practice, expertise, and opportunities to build on local knowledge (p. 198). Connectivity should enable people to learn, solve problems, produce more efficiently, preserve natural systems, and foster peace among communities and nations."

As can be seen from the quotations, the book is rather dense and perhaps better read little by little. Another round of editing to make especially the earlier sections more readable might have made this an award-winning book. The value of the book lies in extracting the details, both the indigenous viewpoint and the innovative ideas.

Dr. Afele is currently maintaining the International Program for Africa that he started as an agricultural faculty member at the University of Guelph. For further online reading, see: <http://www.waoe.org/africanknowledge/>.