



EcCoWell Community Recovery Program

City of Cotonou

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Cotonou in Benin, a would-be learning city, illustrates the situation of learning cities in Africa. The report shows Cotonou as a potential learning city in the context of learning cities in Africa. The work-oriented literacy program “Faire Faire” is discussed as an example of good practice. While Benin currently has a large population of adolescents in the city, as in Africa generally, the city will be challenged by demographic change with growing numbers of older people requiring new policies.

Background Information

The city of Cotonou is the commercial capital of Benin. Benin is an African country which, like most African countries, is making its debut within the learning city/region epistemology and practice. From its emergence in 1992, the concept ‘learning city’ has been understood to imply one or all of four typologies of practice. These practices include the promotion of the statutory provision of education and training to city dwellers, the creation of a viable cultural and economic environment within the city, the ramping up of the city global competitiveness through linking lifelong learning with socio-economic activities and the promotion of the sustainability of the city (EUROlocal, Longworth, 1999; Walters, 2006; Kearns, 2012).

In Africa, the region of Western Cape (South Africa) and the cities of Lagos (Nigeria), Gaborone, (Botswana) Belel, Bafoussam and Mayo-Baleo (Cameroun) have so far been involved in the promotion of one or more of the afore discussed concepts of learning city. A review of the performance of these regions and cities in 2013 concluded that learning city activities were yet to take hold on African soil because of five factor:, absence of developed economies, lack of diversified occupational structures, non-existence of efficient labour markets, absence of developed communication systems and low occupational mobility (Biao, Esaete & Oonyu, 2013). Given that these factors that were found to be absent in Africa, being usually available within

technologically advanced societies, the question was asked whether it could therefore be concluded that learning city projects may then prosper only within technologically advanced societies of the world. The answer was and still is in the negative. Consequently, Biao *et al.* (2013) recommended a model of learning city promotion for Africa that would be supported by three objectives, namely, the *conscientisation* of city dwellers, the facilitation of debate regarding rural-urban interlinkage and the development of a participatory approach to the management of African cities.

Beyond 2013, Volkmann (2020), has shown that, although Nairobi (Kenya) has added itself to the short list of major actors in learning city activities in Africa, and although the number of learning cities in Africa has grown beyond that reported in 2013, Africa still presents the shortest list of learning cities in the world.

Cotonou

Although Cotonou is said to be the commercial capital of Benin, all official institutions of government, save the national assembly and one ministry are located in Cotonou. Indeed, the presidency is located in Cotonou. In practical terms therefore, Cotonou does serve as administrative and political capital of Benin in addition to being the commercial capital of the country.

Cotonou is a recent candidate to learning city activities in Africa. During the course of the year 2020, it promoted a few activities, including participating in the September UIL/PASCAL Webinar on *the challenge of developing the role of TVET* and holding discussions with the Ministry of National Languages and Literacy with a view to working out partnerships.

UIL/PASCAL Webinar

This webinar took place on the 16th September 2020 and it was attended by both the Primary Contact, Idowu Biao and Secondary Contact, Fabien Adeyemi Farinan. The Webinar was used to present the main activity of Cotonou within the context of learning city. Consequently, the main presentation at the webinar centred around the **'FAIRE FAIRE'** learning programme.

- **What is 'FAIRE FAIRE'?**

'FAIRE FAIRE' is a work-oriented literacy programme. It teaches simultaneously

- ✓ One national language (reading, writing & numeracy in the mother tongue) and
- ✓ One skill (selected by learner)

- **Objectives of 'FAIRE FAIRE'**

'FAIRE FAIRE' aims to extend the success of literacy in national languages, the foundation of which was laid between 1972-90 during the Marxist-Leninist regime. Additionally, 'FAIRE FAIRE' aims to equip rural migrants into Cotonou with sellable skills (e.g., electrician, hair dressing, sewing, carpentry, etc.) so that these persons may be profitably engaged.

- **Teaching-Learning in 'FAIRE FAIRE' Training Centres in 2020**

Within the context of the triple life course speed conception referred to by Schuller, Biao & Osborne (2020) wherein the history of human life was divided into three time periods of *low-speed*, *fast-speed* and *faster-speed*, the 'FAIRE FAIRE' training centres acknowledged the latest speed period in which they operated. As such, in addition to regular teaching-learning, the discussion of COVID-19 was migrated into the centres' activities.

- **Current Challenges and Orientation**

As a result of a huge population of adolescents in Cotonou and because of limited resources and facilities, the focus of 'FAIRE FAIRE' is currently on adolescents living in Cotonou. Consequently, the needs of the older population are not being catered for. Additionally, little knowledge and only low capacities being available in the area of COVID-19, the best that could be shared about the pandemic was the set of protocols (wearing of mask, washing of hands and physical distancing) approved by Government. The discussion of these protocols failed to bear their fruits as numerous learners would not adhere to them. Fortunately, none of these learners has so far fallen seriously sick of COVID-19.

- **Achievements and Prospects**

In 2020, 'FAIRE FAIRE' training centres held 80 male and 60 female learners. It is believed that with the establishment of more 'FAIRE FAIRE' training centres in Cotonou, more participants would be trained.

Partnerships

The City of Cotonou entered into partnership with both the Ministry of National Languages and Literacy and the Centre for Research in Adult and Lifelong learning (CR&DALL) of the University of Glasgow that has led into developing a research proposal entitled 'Developing inclusive lifelong learning policies and practices in the Global South'. This proposal is currently being examined for possible funding by the Scottish ***Global Challenges Research Funding***.

Priorities for the Future

In the near future, the focus of 'FAIRE FAIRE' and other learning programmes would shift to the City Council of Abomey Calavi (Mairie d'Abomey Calavi). Abomey Calavi is a new section of Cotonou that has now grown into a town of its own. It has become so sprawling and so heavily inhabited that Government has now moved in, to begin town management activities. In order to facilitate and coordinate its town management activities, Government has recently established

the City Council of Abomey Calavi (Mairie d'Abomey Calavi). The focusing of future activities on this part of Cotonou aims to address the greater challenges that currently exist in that section of the City of Cotonou.

Additionally, learning programmes would be introduced that would cater to the needs of the Aged. A national policy for the Aged does exist in Benin. This policy was formulated in 2007 in recognition of the growing number of Beninese that had begun to live past the mature age of sixty (60) years. The objectives of this policy that is known in French as *la Politique Nationale du Vieillissement Actif-[PNVA]*) include:

- i. The promotion of health and wellbeing among the aged;
- ii. The reduction of poverty among the aged population;
- iii. Inclusion of the aged and;
- iv. The amelioration of knowledge concerning the socio-economic needs and demographics by gender of the aged (Zinsou, 2009).

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