THE VIRTUAL NETWORKS
AS OPPORTUNITY OF SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES FOR POOR YOUNG PEOPLE
IN WEST AFRICAN SUBURBS : THE CASE OF PARLENET PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

In West Africa, the economic and social crisis has been affecting more and more young people, especially those who are living in the suburbs of the big towns like Dakar, Bamako, Cotonou, Abidjan. Unemployment and poverty are increasing and contributing to set those young people aside of conventional and changing society. Another crisis has been created by the introduction of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT) which has aggravated the situation of the poor young people creating a social gap between the rich (from high society) who have access to the virtual world and the poor (from suburbs) who do not have access. The PARLENET Programme has been implemented in order to reduce this social gap and to integrate marginalized poor young people in the society by providing them with space for meetings, exchanges and sharing knowledge and experiences through a virtual network connecting the suburbs of Rufisque (Senegal), Bamako (Mali), Cotonou and Porto-Novo (Benin). Moreover, PARLENET has been working to provoke cultural creativity among the young people from suburbs of French speaking countries in order to valorise their skills, their artistic productions and their image. I would like, through this paper, to share both the experience of the PARLENET Programme and the perspectives for cultural development of young people from West African suburbs through a convivial and democratic community at regional and world level.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of this 3rd Millennium, the world is facing great mutations because of the globalisation of resources and markets, the demographic explosion and the use of the New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT) especially the World Wide Web (internet) and the multimedia tools. A new civilization is being creating. This is the “Society of Information” era which has come after the Hunting, Agriculture and Industry eras and which has provided with deep economic, social and political changes through the world.

Facing this situation, a lot of countries have organized themselves and networks have been created in order to use the new information and communication technologies for their development. West Africa, like the other regions of the world has to face the challenges by implementing policies and strategies of NTIC democritisation and decentralisation. The weakness of the economies, the variety of cultures and the illiteracy make difficult appropriation of the NICT. That is the reason why appropriation of the NICT by the people living in towns have been provoking social and economic changes
which have increased the gap between rich and poor people.

In fact, the private cyber-centres which have been increasing in West African towns are mainly frequented by people from high society which have financial means to pay access to internet services (surfing, mailing, etc). Meanwhile, the poor people from the suburbs specially the young which have not access to those new tools of communication, are set aside of conventional and changing society. It is interesting to notice that 1 hour of internet connexion in a private cyber centres equivalent to 1500 F cfa., which is indeed too expensive for somebody without means.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Situation of the young people in the west African Suburbs

The towns concerned by our study (Dakar, Bamako, Cotonou and Porto Novo) have the following characteristics:
they are densely populated (from 3 to 4 millions inhabitants) and have been growing rapidly (between 5 and 7 %); Their population is, for the most part, young (55 %);
The proliferation of poor suburbs with unemployment and juvenile delinquency is a reality.

In such a context, professional and school integration of the young people is a big challenge the States have to face with few means. Meanwhile the rapid growing of the population would require to multiply school infrastructures and employment opportunities, the States have been committed in budgetary restriction policies which have significantly affected the social sectors such as education and health.

The young people from poor suburbs are the most affected by this situation of crisis. Most of them were obliged to drop out of school because lack of means and became unemployed without any professional qualification. Some of them are devoted themselves to violence, delinquency, and prostitution. Others try to get out of this situation by doing jobs in informal sector.

In that context, the children’s job is a worrying reality specially in the suburbs: shoeblocks and newspapers sellers, carpenters apprentices, or shoe repairers, young domestic employees native from rural zones.

Advent of Internet and virtual networks explosion

Development of internet is accompanied with multiplication of virtual networks which result from two principle:

1. sharing information or access to knowledge is an issue of fairness and development,
2. creating Forums (dynamic spaces of communication) is integrating factor from local to global (Giovannetti, 2000).

Being good at those principles, communities organize themselves at all levels (professional, academic, scientific and economic) recognizing the value of networking and group solidarity. Nowadays, everybody who wants to be recognized or to valorise his experience have to integrate network where people can exchange opinions and communicate through electronic forums.

Inequality with regard to NICT access

The West African countries authorities are now conscious that they have to face challenges generated by the new Society of information created by the NICT which have been enhancing capacities of knowledge acquisition and data processing.

So, being convinced that the use of NICT could have good impact in the social and
economic development of the countries, the governments have been implementing policies and strategies for promoting the new tools. The result of this situation is the rapid development of new information technologies in West Africa during the last decade.

Presently, all West African countries are connected to internet except Liberia in situation of War. Nevertheless, the conditions of the NICT use are not equal from country to another. Populations from the rural zones or from the suburbs, for example, haven’t easy access to internet. Some people can not connect themselves to the web every day or are limited by the law Speed of data transmission while another users can access to safe and quick connections in the big towns as Dakar, Abidjan and Ouagadougou.

The causes of these disparities in the NICT use can be classified in 3 categories:

a) Weakness of the National Point of internet access: Every Country which has got an internet access, is connected to the World Wide Web through a national point of Internet access characterised by reception and transmission equipment (Satellite, cable). The quantity of information transmitted, per second (expressed in byte/s) allows to determine quality of the information exchanges. Showing the regional disparities, we can notice that the Band Width is 128 000 bps in Mali, while it is 2 128 000 bps in Senegal.

b) Connection costs include both telephone and Internet Services: Telephone costs are paid to the National Telecommunication operator like SONATEL in Senegal and internet Services costs go to the National Internet Access Provider; those costs wary between 10 000 FCFA and 35 000 FCFA in West Africa.

c) The characteristics of telephone network infrastructures can also be considered as one of the disparities causes. It is a basic element in the internet connection system. Its development more or less important will allows to easy or difficult access to a telephone line (teledensity = number of telephone lines for 100 habitants). Teledensity is very weak in West Africa and can varies from 0.16 % in Guinea to 1.20 % in Senegal.

PARLENET AS OPPORTUNITY OF COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF SUBURBS

As we notice it with disparities previously highlighted, the advent of NICT has contributed to aggravate the situation of the young people in the suburbs by provoking social gap which is being worst more and more with regard to geographical situation and to easy access or not to the virtual world.

The young people from the high society can enjoy themselves with the new communication tools. Meanwhile, the poor young people from the suburbs are set in a marginalized situation because lack of means.

The Parlenet programme have been implemented in order to correct this injustice by providing the young people from suburbs with opportunities to have access to the NICT and to integrate virtual networks like the young from the high society.

Initiated by the Eur-african Association for Promotion of Traditional Cultures(AEA), the Parlenet Programme had began its activities at October 2001, in 3 countries of the South (Senegal, Mali, Benin) and 1 country of the North (France). It aims to create, with use of the NICT and their large implementation in the countries of the South, cultural and educative contents
which participate to citizen and democratic expression of the youth.

In another words, the objectives of Parlenet are:

- Allowing the young people from poor zones to express their ideas and to communicate in French like they can and feel it;
- Reducing disparities and to valorising young interlocutors;
- Promoting variety related to practice of the French language (regionalism, particular turns of young’s language expression);
- Encouraging the young’s cultural creativity.

In order to achieve these objectives, the Programme has established and equipped Community Cyber Centres in the suburbs of the countries which participate to the programme. The Community Cyber Centres are real cultural laboratories where the young people, connected in networking through internet, realize their cultural and artistic productions within workshops.

Opportunity for communicating and opening oneself to the world for the young people

Writing Workshops, often organized in the Community Cyber Centres, allow the young from the North and the South to communicate by sharing their opinions and experiences and opening themselves to the world. What they never couldn’t do without Parlenet Programme which gives them easy access to the virtual networks through internet.

In fact, writing workshops have been created for the marginalized young from the South (West African suburbs) and the North (European cities). In west Africa, the workshops have been organized for / by the young who have early quitted school and worked in informal sector like drivers of “zemidians”, motorcycedes used as public taxis at Cotonou, “Coxeurs”(seekers of customers for public transporters) at Dakar and Bamako, shoeblacks, young domestic employees, young doing little jobs, …

During these workshops, the young people are able to participate to forums in French expressing their ideas and opinions like they feel and speak. Usually, the young make success of these workshops because there aren’t any constraints making them afraid of making mistakes when speaking or writing.

Forums establish connections between the young people of the North and the South’s suburbs situated in the following zones:

Dakar (Senegal), with the support of ENDA, and NGO;
Bamako (Mali), with the CERPOP (Research and Study Centre in Population),
Cotonou (Benin), with NGOs ORISHA and “Planete Jeunes”,
Porto Novo (Benin), with NGO Songhai,
Sévran (France), with the Social Centre Marcel Paul;
Marseille (France), with the School “Friche de la Belle de Mai”;
Guilvinec (France), with the sea professional School;
Paris (France), with the school Jean Luçat

In addition, an electronic newspaper is jointly edited by the young who participate to the workshops. It’s a monthly publication realized by following stages:

(a) Items or papers are written by the young in relation with their centres of interest and put in a common base which will provide the electronic newspaper with contents;
(b) an editing committee, composed of 2 teams (community Cyber-Centres) which participate to Parlenet, is created and varying from issue to another. For example, Cotonou will be related with the Marcel Paul Centre of Paris, and then Bamako with Dakar, so and on.

The writing workshops’ productions and the electronic newspaper which is in its 2nd edition are available for access in the web site with the following address:

http://www.parlenet.org

Space of cultural creativity

Another rule of Parlenet is promoting cultural creativity by the young people of suburbs and connecting in network the young’s knowledge productions.

With that in mind, Literature Workshops have been, parallely to the Writing Workshops, implemented to allow young people expressing their artistic skills related to fiction, tales, story, popular novel, hip-hop,… The objective is to make emerging a popular literature accessible for the Large public as it already exists in most African countries.

We can also notice existence of Shared Stories which consist in considering real or imaginary personality common to two groups concerned and in telling his story using the iconography proposed through internet. The groups will alternately share the tasks of writing and editing stories. a chapter will be written by one group and the next by another and so on.

Finally, the Parlenet Site Web has been quickly become, since its beginning in October 2001, an informal and convivial space for each participant. It has encouraged increasing cultural initiatives with literature and artistic productions like the electronic newspaper tales, plays, stories jointly realised by the young people connected in electronic forums.

**PERSPECTIVES FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN WEST AFRICAN SUBURBS**

With its two objectives, namely promoting exchanges between the young of suburbs and arousing cultural creativity, the Parlenet programme have been working for social and economic development of African suburbs. Which means in concrete terms valorising the young’s cultural productions, valorising these persons and promoting emergence of a convivial and democratic society.

**Valorising the persons**

The results achieved grained in the suburbs by the Parlenet programme allow to notice valorisation of the young people in 3 levels- a) visibility, b) social integration and c) opening on the world.

**a) Making the poor young people more visible**

Through the forums, the young have been appropriating the web using it as a space of sharing ideas and opinions, having decompartmentalization and being citizen. Mastering (which is the meaning of the Greek word “Cyber”) the New Information and Communication Technologies by the young publics who are marginalized, about topics satisfying their requirements, has been now become reality with Parlenet.

These exchanges are about varied topics such as: daily life, wedding marginalized work, unemployment, AIDS, generations gap, love, friendship, religions, violence,……

Besides, more visibility and recognition are provided to the young people by information related to their identity, their districts and their cultures which are available on the Parlenet Web Site and accessible from everywhere through the world.
Therefore, the poor young people are rehabilitated in their rights to access to the New Information and Communication Technologies in the same way as the young from high society.

b) **Social integration**

In addition allowing to the poor young to be visible and recognized, Parlenet is opportunity, for some of them, to get employment and to be socially integrated.

Considering the staff of the Parlenet’s Community Cyber Centres, all of the persons working there are recruited among the young from the suburbs. For example, if we consider the Community Cyber Centre of Rufisque (Dakar), there are 5 persons working there: 1 monitor, 2 animators, 1 accountant, 1 guardian. The same goes for the other Cyber-Centres of Bamako, Cotonou and Porto-Novo.

It’s interesting for us to notice that the young people who participate to the workshops have also opportunity to be trained, in return, with small cost, in Computer Skills (windows, Word, Excel, Access, Internet, …), Communication Technologies, Accounting and English Language. The young people receive certificate at the end of training. Thus, they will be able, with their certificates, to find jobs in the NGOs, private sector or informal sector.

At last, the young people who have already got a job (like carpenters, artists, tailors, traders) have been provided, through Parlenet activities, with technologies and knowledge allowing them to improve their profession.

c) **Allowing opening on the world**

Parlenet is also an opportunity to have relations and exchanges with other people through the world for the young living in the suburbs. Factually, the young from Dakar, Bamako, Cotonou, Porto-Novo can be connected through electronic forums where they can discuss on varied topics and share initiatives and information each other or with other persons from developed countries (France, Canada).

In this way, they make a virtual travel as to discover other young, other cultures, other people. It is marvellous for them, who have never get out of their country, to be able to communicate with other people.

**Valorisation of cultural productions**

According Parlenet strategy, valorisation of the persons will be successful if It is supported by actions aiming to valorise cultural productions which are results from the young cultural creativity. The cultural productions (stories, tales, exchanges on topics, plays, newspaper, hip-hop words) are, in this way, valorised and their authors are recognized and accepted as a whole part of the society.

At that prospect of valorising cultural products, Parlenet has privileged 3 ways of dissemination for promoting the young’s cultural products : the web site, the CD-ROM and paper edition.

Certainly, the Parlenet’s web site is the best mean for promoting the young’s cultural productions because it allows global access to them from everywhere from the world. Also, the young people participating to the forum can give their points of view on current topics and have their papers edited in the electronic newspaper available for access.

The CD-ROM edition is another mean used by Parlenet for promoting productions. It enables easy access to those who have not internet connexion.

Also, paper editions are realized in spite of development of the new technologies.
Emergence of social and democratic society

Allowing poor young people to communicate and to express their cultural sensibility with literature and artistic productions, Parlenet would like to participate to building convivial and democratic society which accepts everybody. Otherwise, the cultural productions created by the young people within the Parlenet’s workshops organized at Dakar, Bamako, Cotonou or Porto-Nov, peremptorily speak to society including message such as: call to solidarity and tolerance, call to recognizing the less weak, call to fighting against poverty, violence, unemployment, sensibilization on AIDS, environment, health and any relevant issues.

CONCLUSION

Meanwhile poverty has been growing in the west African suburbs, creating disparities on NICT access, democratisation of New Communication Technologies and delivery of the young’s initiatives are the only way of salvation. Which is understood by the Parlenet initiators who have been implementing the programme after had clearly analysed the situation.

The reality is that Parlenet is contributing significantly to fight against young poverty in the suburbs by making easy communication through virtual networks, sharing initiatives, arousing cultural creativity and making employments available for young.

The Community Cyber Centres created to that aim constitute, for the young people of suburbs, not only the way for entering into networks but also solution to get out from poverty and marginalization. It is just because the activities of communication and the cultural productions realized in the Community Cyber Centres have been really contributing to valorise, to diversify, to disseminate and to decompartmentize the young’s initiatives and experiences. But, the struggle for developing the poor young people in the suburbs is not won yet.

The Parlenet activities will be successful only if they enable the young people to get vision of globality (scale changing) which sets them free from poverty and put them in the way of development. That is challenge which has to be faced, day after day, for success of the Parlenet Programme. In this way, one would be able to say, at the assessment time, the struggle for social and economic development was won by the virtual.

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