

Final monitoring and evaluation report E-Learning Entrepreneurship in West Africa project

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SUMMARY

IOM was requested by The Network University (TNU) to undertake the external monitoring and evaluation of the project E-Learning for Entrepreneurship in West Africa.

This project is designed to help (prospective) business people in Sierra Leone to identify opportunities, find a market niche, formulate realistic plans and develop a small or medium sized business that will create sufficient income for themselves and boost the country's economic development. The E-learning project / distance coaching complements the traditional classroom teaching and presents a promising alternative to acquire education and skills for students, who are unable to access facilities within the physical classroom due to time and space constraints.

The objective of the monitoring and evaluation report is to assess the results of E-Learning for Entrepreneurship in West Africa project, identify challenges and bottlenecks faced by the project during the implementation and lessons learned for possible follow-up of the project or other such initiatives in the future.

The project has been relevant for Sierra Leone and for (prospective) entrepreneurs. Also most of the coaches in the Netherlands showed commitment to contribute to successful start ups in Sierra Leone and there has been evidence of their added value and sustainability. Some of them stated that they will stay in contact with their students, also after the project.

In two phases, 132¹ persons registered themselves for the Online E-Learning for entrepreneurship programme (91 person in the first phase and 41 persons in the second phase of the programme). 51 participants participated regularly and intensively in the programme and they will receive one or two certificates. However the objective of the programme was not to have participants complete a course with a certificate but to support business people in Sierra Leone to set up a small or medium sized business that will create sufficient income for themselves and boost the country economic development. In addition to this it was to be explored if the project could be expanded after the first two years - on the basis of the experience in Sierra Leone – to other English speaking countries in Africa in cooperation with local partners in these countries, involving more migrant entrepreneurs in Europe in the coaching process. So far the setting up of businesses has been lagging behind. The Ebola outbreak which has caused the delayed start of the project has been a hindering factor in this respect. Also the internet connections deteriorated, because of Ebola, as the main internet providers left the country.

¹ This includes 10 participants that did the online course from Guinea Conakry



Seven recommendations have been formulated, which could be further explored to provide further evidence for the effectiveness of such an online entrepreneurship programme with distance coaching by diaspora. They refer to:

1. A careful selection of the participants
2. Intake meetings and introduction to the coaches
3. Selection of the coaches
4. Proper internet connections
5. The role of the trainers
6. Coherence of the program (Online learning, physical classes, distance coaching)
7. Access to start capital



1. Objective of the monitoring and evaluation and scope of work

The overall objective of the monitoring and evaluation of this project is to contribute to a further understanding of the potential of e-learning and distance learning/ coaching and to provide guidance for future similar projects and initiatives.

The monitoring took place during all project activities and served to provide feed-back to the project partners, in order to timely address issues that may come up during the process of implementation and advise on adjustments if needed.

This final monitoring and evaluation report of the E-Learning Entrepreneurship in West Africa (Sierra Leone) is the follow up of the mid-term monitoring report that IOM submitted to the project management (TNU and MD consultancy) and the donor (Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs) in September 2015.

The primary users of the monitoring and evaluation are the project management (TNU and MD consultancy), who will get feed-back about the achievements and constraints of the project activities and lessons learned.

Also the monitoring and evaluation reports will be shared with the donor and can be further discussed to provide guidance on future programming.

2. Methodology and approaches

IOM introduced a range of tools and methods to conduct this phase of the monitoring and evaluation.

- Project document and reports by TNU / MD consultancy.
- Regular face-to-face contacts and e-mail correspondence with the management of the project and partners (TNU, MD consultancy, IAMTECH University)
- In-country field visits (by IOM Freetown) and interviews in Sierra Leone with main stake holders including trainers, participants, project coordinator in Sierra Leone
- In-country field visits (by IOM The Hague) and interviews in Sierra Leone with main stake holders including 15 participants, project coordinator in Sierra Leone
- Repeated interviews with coaches in the Netherlands.



3. Key findings

3.1. Relevance of the programme

Based on the testimony of participants, trainers in Sierra Leone, the representative of the Sierra Leonean Chamber of Commerce, Director of IAMTECH and the project coaches in the Netherlands it can be concluded that the concept of E-Learning project is very relevant for Sierra Leone and for the young entrepreneurs. In a country such as Sierra Leone where the education facilities are limited and not everyone has access to formal education, e-learning is a viable alternative and complementary to regular classes.

The innovative approach in transferring knowledge and skills in particular in the area of entrepreneurship was much appreciated by the students and the coaches.

However in a country, where students and teachers are more familiar with traditional, classroom teaching, the potential of e-learning and additional distant coaching was not fully exploited by some participants. This will be further elaborated below.

3.2. Contents of the programme

3.2.1. E-learning modules

The online modules offered by the Network University are relevant and useful. The feedback on the content of the modules from the participants who did make use of their access to the learning environment has been generally positive.

The modules were tested with the coaches as participants – with overall positive feedback from them. Yet, some coaches found that the English language should be adapted. There is a lot of text in the modules, which for some participants was sometimes hard to understand. It could be kept shorter and simpler, according to some coaches.

Also some participants are not really computer literate, so they found it very difficult to actively participate in the project.

Finally, although since the midterm monitoring of the project the internet connectivity at the IAMTECH computer lab has been improved, some students indicated that it was not always available. This affected the learning process, as it was not possible to go through the modules off-line.

3.2.2. Training sessions/workshop

IOM has been present at workshops organized for participants at IAMTECH and the final conference. During these visits, IOM had the opportunity to observe how trainers moderate the training sessions, availability of facilities and equipment, online tools,



experience of participants. During the final conference of the project in Freetown, IOM had the opportunity to get a deeper insight in business ideas and plans of some participants and discussed with them the relevance of the programme and challenges that they faced during the implementation of the project.

The training took place in the form of a workshop by the project team of three members (two trainers and one coordinator), each heading a group and participants with higher skills becoming group leaders. The project training methodology was to provide essential hands-on tools and instruments to develop and apply entrepreneurial competencies and skills. The channels for practical skill transfer are examples, case studies, exercises, application to one's own real-life situation, etc., along with presentations and assignments and constant practice, repetition and reflection.

As it was also mentioned in the midterm monitoring and evaluation report it was observed and later during the monitoring visit by IOM The Hague confirmed that the local trainers acted more as teachers than as trainers. The workshops were not centered around exercises but mostly about lecturing and knowledge transfer. In a class the lecturers provided the information and participants were required to listen. This is the traditional way of teaching, but not the original idea of the classes.

3.2.3. Online / distance coaching by coaches in the Netherlands

Based on interviews with project's coaches in the Netherlands and programme participants in Sierra Leone, we can conclude that they all seemed to be well trained and very committed to do their tasks. Contrary to our initial expectations, not all of them had a West African background. We had envisaged that a West African or more specifically a Sierra Leonean background would be beneficial in maintaining contacts with the students and also helpful in providing coaching for business set up in Sierra Leone. We learned from TNU that in this regard coaches could be complementary to each other with some having more experience in West Africa and others more expertise in specific aspects of business set up (like finance, marketing).

Every coach had five or six participants to provide them with advice on developing business ideas and information. However coaches were not able to establish contact with all participants. Most coaches indicated that they had intensive contacts only with two participants. In a possible follow up project of other such initiative more effort is needed to motivate other participants to interact with coaches in the Netherlands. In addition efforts have been made to ensure access of participants to internet and other online communication, such as WhatsApp. There were internet facilities at IAMTECH and in the second phase of the project internet facilities and accessibility have been improved. However internet access for participants at IAMTECH's facilities has not been realized in the way it was expected. This was partly because of the Ebola crisis since most internet providers left the country during the outbreak of Ebola and after the end of Ebola epidemic they were reluctant to come back.



3.2.4. Coherence between the different components

Some participants relied foremost on the classes in Freetown, whereas others made only uses of the web based learning environment and/or benefited more from the interactions with the coaches. Apparently the trainers in Sierra Leone did not have direct interactions with the coaches. Such interactions could have been beneficial to ensure that the different components are complementary to each other. Also individual participants with certain ideas, questions, etc. could be further discussed between them.

3.3. Outreach, selection and orientation

The outreach strategy relied heavily on IAMTECH to spread the word about the programme among its students. In addition to this, outreach was done via radio programmes. Although the radio attracted many candidates, many of them were not suited for the programme. 132 persons registered for the programme, which proves the high interest in the programme. The programme could have attracted more suitable participants if the outreach activities were also focused on other higher education institutions in Sierra Leone as well. We learned from the project management that this would have created some competition for IAMTECH.

For the second phase of the programme, the selection of participants has become stricter. However we still found out that several participants lacked communication skills in English, writing skills and basic experience with the Internet.

Some participants had a good business idea; however they could not present their idea in English. The Dutch IOM project officer needed a translator for an interview with them. Some participants did not use email before. Even when they had, they only had limited access as little as once a week or even just once a month. This constraint affected the interaction frequency and coaching impact of the project.

These were obvious impediments for an active participation in an online program. Also it was suggested to include a proper trajectory for all participants to inform them about the goal of the project and prepare them better for the course and coaching in terms of their expectation, orientation and communication.

Overall a more selective approach is needed based on motivation, business skills, writing skills and English communication of potential candidates.

3.4. Communication

3.4.1. Communication between coaches and participants

More than 60% of the registered participants never reacted to the efforts of their coaches to get into contact with them. Some may have been deterred by the fee (10 €), to be paid



to IAMTECH. The coaches stated that some participants were not familiar with the use of internet or could not pay for Internet access. Also there may have been unrealistic expectations. Some participants expected concrete assistance and funding in business set up, which is not provided in the programme.

Some participants stated that their coaches were not always available. Apparently they were also expecting quick feed-back, also outside regular working hours.

3.4.2. Communication between coaches and coordinator and trainers in Sierra Leone

There have been interactions between coaches in the Netherlands and the project coordinator in Sierra Leone, however there was no interaction between coaches and trainers in Sierra Leone. The trainers moderated the weekly meetings at IAMTECH and gave additional advice to the participants in the project. Contacts with the trainers have mainly been indirect via the project coordinator in Freetown. As said before direct interaction/communication between coaches in the Netherlands and trainers could have been beneficial in ensuring complementarity of the different components and to discuss certain issues that come up.

3.4.3. Internet access for project participants

Overall internet connectivity in Sierra Leone is currently problematic. Apparently some providers left the country due to the Ebola outbreak.

Internet access by participants and slow online interaction between coaches and students is an issue. The project is designed for the participants to have access to the modules online and to have regular communication with coaches through email as well as exchange of short messages through WhatsApp. The modules cannot be downloaded and the students cannot upload their business idea, business plan or other questions. Some coaches suggested creating a database where the modules can be uploaded so that the students have access while they are not online.

A few students could fully access the web platform through their phones. This could be a break-through as broadband internet becomes more widely available in the country.

Efforts have to be made to assure better access of participants to internet and interaction between coaches and participants.

4. Conclusions

Online courses can be a viable and useful alternative for or be complementary to physical classes, esp. in the area of business development for young entrepreneurs. Internet connectivity, expectations and the didactics of the training and lack of coherence between the different components, were the main challenges faced to the project. Some participants benefited more from the classes, whereas others made more frequent use of the online modules and the distance coaching. More evidence is needed to really come to sound conclusions with regard to the impact of such an initiative.



132 registered participants in the project, which is well above the target of 100 students. However only 16 of them were already owner of a small business, whereas the target for this was 50.

51 participants participated regularly and intensively in the programme and they received certificates. 14 participants of the programme received the Network University certificate and 39 participants received IAMTECH certificates. 5 participants received both certificate for TNU as well as from IAMTECH. 20 business proposals were received. It has to be noted that these business plans have not been finalized yet. This is, because the participants still have some difficulties to come with a detailed financial plan covering their business plans. The participants can expect further assistance with regard to the elaboration of the proposals, but getting concrete funding remains the main challenge. The participants of the E-Learning project appreciated the programme very much. They indicated that the project has additional value for them in terms of how to look at set up a realistic business plan and how to manage funds /money when they can start an enterprise. Next to it, they valued the advice and the coaching capacity of the coaches in the Netherlands.

At this stage, there has been no strong evidence that such businesses have been developed or expanded (creating income and further local employment), as a direct consequence of the project. It seems that more time is needed than expected for business plans to be realized. This is partly because of difficulties in getting a start capital in Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone the banks and other financial institutions are very reluctant to provide loans to business people. If they provide such loan, the interest rate is very high (30 to 40%). Compare it with the Netherlands, where the average interest rate is 3 to 5%.

Although providing financial support for realization of business plans was not the objective of the Online E-Learning project, we found that the project managers and some of the coaches are still very active in addressing the issue of start capital through the identification of potential sponsors, crowd funding and networking both in Sierra Leone and in the Netherlands.

One of unexpected developments in the project was that in fact there are two parallel groups: one group of students who are only very active online and they have any regular contact with the coaches in the Netherlands and with the project manager and coordinator in the Netherlands and the other group that only participate in the classical colleges at IAMTECH and they do not have any contact with the coaches. The latter group does not really apply the innovate approach of the project, and the role of the trainers / physical courses therefore should be revisited.

Although in the second phase of the project the internet facilities at IAMTECH have improved, some students expressed that they still they have limited access to internet facilities there. The selection of students for the E-Learning Entrepreneurship project has improved in the second phase of the project. However some students still do not fully



understand the objective of the E-learning project which is to learn to develop a realistic business plan and set up an enterprise.

In the midterm evaluation report a trajectory for participants was recommended to inform the participants about the goal of the project and prepare them better for the different components of the course in terms of their expectations, orientation and communication. This should include what kind of assistance can be expected from the coaches and what is the purpose of the classical trainings in Sierra Leone. The intake meetings with the new participants have been improved since then. However some coaches still indicated that they were not sufficiently involved in the intake trajectory. They were introduced through email to the participants. This was not sufficient. If they had been more involved (e.g. through Skype) in it, perhaps they had a better picture about the participants from the beginning and the communication with them would have been better.

All coaches that were interviewed indicated that they will stay in contact with the participants. They remain open to provide them with advice and answer their questions if they have. They will also try to introduce the participants to their network for possible start capital and other business support. However the coaches indicated that it is very difficult to start crowd funding or introduce them to organizations in the Netherlands for possible financial support since the participants are in Sierra Leone. E.g. to start a crowd funding initiative through PIF World, you need to be an NGO registered in the Netherlands. Furthermore Dutch NGOs that are active in fund raising require 50% start capital from the participants.

Some coaches were not originally from Sierra Leone diaspora. Some highlighted that they did not have a good understanding of the entrepreneurship culture and climate in Sierra Leone. There may also have been language barriers in communication with these coaches. Most coaches had African roots, but for such a coaching exercise, more specific knowledge and understanding of the Sierra Leonean context is of added value.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Selection of the participants

As advised in the midterm monitoring and evaluation report, in the second phase of the project a more selective approach of project's participants took place. However in a future project a more selective approach of candidates is needed based on their motivation, expectations, business skills, and writing and online communication skills. A broader outreach, including involvement of other educational institutes, next to IAMTECH, is to be considered.



5.2. Intake meeting with participants and introducing them with the coaches

A trajectory for participants is recommended to inform them about the goal of the project and prepare them better for the different components of the course in terms of their expectations, orientation and communication. This should include what kind of assistance can be expected from the coaches and what is the purpose of the classical trainings in Sierra Leone.

A better introduction of the coaches to the participants is needed (through Skype) to have a better picture about the participants' background from the beginning of the programme.

5.3. Selection of coaches

Some coaches were not originally from Sierra Leone diaspora. They did not have any idea about entrepreneurship culture and climate in Sierra Leone. It is recommended to select coaches from Sierra Leone diaspora or to start a trajectory for the coaches to provide them with information about business culture in the selected country. More frequent interactions between the coaches to stress their complementarity would also be beneficial in this regard.

5.4. Online Communication

The project was a blend of online and on-campus training. Internet is an integral part of the project. IAMTECH has its own computer lab and internet connectivity. However access to internet and other communication means should be assessed before starting an online programme. In the future more effort is needed to increase access of participants to the email facilities and short messages through WhatsApp. Also usage of the e-learning modules could be improved through better internet connections and possibilities to work through the modules offline.

5.5. Training in Sierra Leone

The trainers in Sierra Leone were more occupied with traditional lecturing than providing training to the participants. They are professionals and highly credited and appreciated by IAMTECH and participants. However to meet the objectives of the project they should be given the opportunity to follow a “train the trainer course” via the online setting.

5.6. Communication and information exchange between coaches and trainers / coordinator in Sierra Leone

For the coordinator and the trainers in Sierra Leone it seemed to be unclear what the coaches in the Netherlands were doing with the participants. At the same time most coaches stated that there was no interaction between them and the trainers. The interaction, communication and information exchange needs to improve. In a possible future programme it is recommended to arrange a physical exchange between one or



more coaches in the Netherlands with the coordinator and trainers in the target country.

5.7. Funding for the realization of business plans of participants

The ultimate objective of the E-Learning Entrepreneurship in West Africa project was to assist 50 prospective entrepreneurs to develop a small or medium sized business in Sierra Leone. Many participants of course look for opportunities to get grants or loans for their business plans. Financing the projects was not part of the programme and this should be clearly communicated to the participants. The online programme contains two modules on how to get start-up capital and how to find investment capital to finance growth, but these were hardly consulted. It could be considered in a future initiative to make small grants available as a kind of prize for the most successful participants with the best business plans. Also the usage of the PIF World platform (through an NL registered NGO, which would support business start ups in Sierra Leone or other target countries, could be further explored.

6. Follow-up actions

- The Network University in cooperation with the project coordinator in Sierra Leone will finalize some business plans of students and select some of them for possible funding.
- Until the end of 2016 The Network University will explore the possibility of the establishment of a fund for the realization of some promising business plans.
- IOM will provide the Network University with advice about fund raising, networking and crowd-funding.