ODL TAKES UP THE CHALLENGE OF AFRICAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
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The concept of sustainable development is being linked to the African context forming an indivisible binomial since it is universally recognized as the only kind of possible development in that specific region. It is therefore necessary that African people are able to autonomously lead and manage their own growth.

The globalisation has added a new dimension to that challenge. On the one hand it offers opportunities of development connected to the integration of markets and the mobility of capital; on the other hand it stresses the North-South divide since its costs and benefits are not equally distributed.

In particular, the disparity between communities who can take advantage of the progress of new technologies for cultural, economic and knowledge development and those who are excluded form that process, is increasing. It should be thus recommended to manage the globalisation efficiently in accordance with the precepts of sustainable development.

The 2nd ACDE Conference and General Assembly - *Open and Distance Learning for Sustainable Development* which was held in Lagos, Nigeria on 8-11 July 2008, tried to suggest a solution to those issues. The conference was organized by ACDE - African Council for Distance Education in collaboration with the Open University of Nigeria and the support of UNESCO. The African Council for Distance Education is a continental body comprising African Universities and other higher educational institutions which are committed to expanding access to quality education and training through open and distance learning. ACDE was formally launched in January 2004 at Egerton University in Kenya whilst the inaugural conference was held in August 2005 at the University of South Africa in Pretoria.

The meeting of Lagos confirmed that ODL is not only an idea whose time has come but it also means spearheading a new wave of higher education provision that is rendering borders increasingly porous and is challenging traditional and existing notions of dedicated spaces for face-to-face education versus so-called "distance" education. With its hallmarks of flexibility and adaptability, ODL is traversing new domains and opening up hitherto impossible opportunities for many people whose circumstances would otherwise have consigned

to the graves of lost chance and wasted intellect. In the framework of a socio-economic and geographic-political context so complex and unique, open and distance learning can represent a valuable factor of progress and renewal.

The event attracted over 350 participants from five continents and 29 countries including experts, policy makers, and stakeholders who brought their contribution to the discussion addressing six fundamental sub-themes:

- Open & Distance Learning and teacher development.

- Meeting the challenges of the millennium development goals: the role, potential and impact of ODL.

- Capacity building in ODL.

- Quality assurance in ODL.

- Collaboration and pa rtnerships in ODL models, challenges and responses.

- E-Learning and ODL in developing nations: problems and prospects.

The debate gave rise to interesting proposals and highlighted the huge potentialities that ODL has in every field of education. Indeed, the different papers emphasized the role that open and distance education could cover in Africa enabling to:

- Improve curricula and teaching quality.

- Foster access to education for people living in rural and remote areas.

- Facilitate the inclusion of marginalised people.

- Promote knowledge and use of new technologies and working methods in agriculture.

- Promote equality and women empowerment.

- Fight the illiteracy of older people.

- Support the capacity building and rehabilitation of prison inmates.
- Foster awareness and control of infectious diseases, in particular malaria and HIV, in the most isolated regions of developing countries.

In the light of that, ODL can actually be considered as an essential tool to meet the challenges of UN's Millennium Development Goals. What has emerged from the conference of Lagos is that the acquisition of knowledge, competencies and skills which are needed to lead the African continent towards the progress and equality with developed countries can be achieved through the new technologies and the innovative modalities of open and distance learning.