



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Investing in Somalia's Future Through Leadership Training and Learning

Navigating Digital Poverty: Why EdTech Alone Will Not Solve Illiteracy in Somalia

EdTech is often sold to us as a breakthrough, a modern answer to old educational problems. In countries like Somalia, where illiteracy continues to limit opportunity and development, digital platforms are frequently presented as a way out. The promise is simple and compelling: if we can put learning on a screen, we can reach everyone, everywhere.

But I do not believe the problem is that simple. And more importantly, I do not believe the solution is either.

What Somalia faces is not just an education gap; it is a reality shaped by digital poverty. Until we confront that honestly, any conversation about EdTech risks becoming more aspirational than practical.

Digital poverty is not just about whether someone owns a smartphone or can access the internet. It is about whether that access is stable, affordable, and meaningful. It is about whether a student has electricity at home, whether they can afford data, whether they understand how to navigate digital tools, and whether the content they encounter speaks their language, literally and culturally. In many parts of Somalia, especially in rural and fragile settings, these conditions are not guaranteed. They are the exception, not the norm.

So when we talk about EdTech as a solution to illiteracy, we must ask a more uncomfortable question: who exactly is this solution for? Because if it primarily serves those who are already connected, already resourced, and already closer to opportunity, then it is not solving inequality but quietly reinforcing it.

There is a tendency, especially in global development conversations, to treat technology as a shortcut. As if complex, deeply rooted challenges like illiteracy can be resolved through innovation alone. But illiteracy in Somalia is not simply the result of a lack of content or classrooms. It is tied to poverty, displacement, gender inequality, insecurity, and years of institutional fragility. Technology does not erase these realities. It enters into them.

And when it does, it often carries assumptions that do not fit. Many digital learning platforms are designed for environments with stable infrastructure, formal schooling systems, and English-speaking users. That is not the lived experience of most Somali learners. When these tools are introduced without adaptation, they do not just fall short; they risk alienating the very people they are meant to serve.



This is why I am cautious of the growing narrative that positions EdTech as the future of education in contexts like ours. Not because technology has no role to play, but because it is being asked to do too much, too quickly, and often without enough understanding of the environment it is entering.

And yet, rejecting EdTech altogether would be equally short-sighted.

There is real potential here; if we are willing to approach it differently. In a country where physical access to schools is often disrupted, the flexibility of digital learning can be powerful. Mobile-based platforms can reach learners who are otherwise excluded. Online resources can open doors to knowledge, skills, and networks that were previously out of reach. For young people navigating uncertainty, this kind of access matters.

If EdTech is to contribute meaningfully to reducing illiteracy in Somalia, it must be grounded in context. It must start with the realities of the learner, not the capabilities of the technology. That means designing solutions that work with limited connectivity, not assuming constant access. It means prioritizing Somali language content, not relying on English as the default. It means recognizing and building on existing forms of learning, oral traditions, community teaching, informal knowledge systems rather than attempting to replace them.

Sometimes, the most effective solutions will not look like “advanced” technology at all. They may be as simple as radio-based education, SMS learning, or offline digital content that can be shared across devices. These approaches may not be as impressive on paper, but they are far more aligned with the realities on the ground; and alignment is what determines whether a solution works.

There is also a deeper issue that cannot be ignored: education is not just about delivering information. It is about shaping individuals who can think critically, participate in society, and contribute to collective progress. When learning is reduced to data points, completion rates, and digital engagement metrics, we risk losing sight of this broader purpose. Technology can support learning, but it cannot define what learning should be.

This is why the role of institutions, policy, and leadership is critical. Digital education cannot exist in isolation. It must be part of a broader commitment to strengthening education systems as a whole. That includes investing in teachers, improving infrastructure, developing inclusive curricula, and ensuring that digital initiatives serve public interests rather than purely commercial ones.



For Somalia, the conversation should not be about whether to adopt EdTech, but about how to shape it in a way that reflects our realities and our priorities. We cannot afford to import solutions that were never designed for us and expect them to work. We must build, adapt, and lead in ways that are grounded in our own context.

I am convinced that EdTech can play a role in addressing illiteracy but only if we stop treating it as the solution. It is a tool, and like any tool, its value depends on how it is used. If we approach it with clarity, humility, and a deep understanding of digital poverty, it can expand access and opportunity. If we do not, it risks becoming another layer of inequality disguised as progress.

The future of education in Somalia will not be determined by technology alone. It will be shaped by the choices we make about how that technology is integrated into the realities of people's lives. And that is where the real work begins.

