

INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY BLOOME, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MOBILES FOR EDUCATION ALLIANCE

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon
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EXCERPTS:

- “In response to the Afghan refugee crisis in the United States, the Alliance expanded its programs to support Afghan refugee learners. This has included rapidly setting up a resource repository of hundreds of children’s books in Dari and Pashto along with other educational resources for K-12 learners on our [Afghan Youth Support Hub](#) site and connecting these resources to the refugee relief efforts.”
- “The Alliance itself is a network of 45 organizations with common interest in supporting EdTech, but we have also established networks of literacy app developers (i.e., [Literacy League](#)) and global math champions (e.g., [Math Power!](#)) to increase dialogue and professional development exchanges among these communities to impact their work globally and locally.”

Could you please describe where you currently work and what your responsibilities are?

I am currently the Executive Director of the [Mobiles for Education \(mEducation\) Alliance](#). I founded the mEducation Alliance in 2010 when I was USAID’s senior education technology specialist and after 11 years of support from that Agency, rolled it out as an independent non-profit last year. Among other activities, the mEducation Alliance is the largest convener of development, donor, agencies, multilateral, bilateral, large iNGOs, and foundations with a common interest in the appropriate and scalable uses of technology in low-resource context. Having said this, we have also expanded our activities in the last several months to support Afghan refugees in the United States.

As the Executive Director of a small non-profit, I closely work with our staff on all activities including fundraising, strategic priority setting, dialoguing with our 45 [Alliance member institutions](#) and advisory board members, and developing a range of communications products and catalytic activities. The latter includes advancing new initiatives such as our [Afghan Kids Support Hub](#), [Literacy League](#), and [Math Power!](#)

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Anthony Bloome, Executive Director of the Mobiles for Education Alliance, discusses some of his experiences with digitalization in education. The interview is part of a series on that topic.

Visit us at www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org.

You have been active in the field of education and digitalization for a long time at USAID before your current position with mEducation Alliance. What are some trends you've observed for digitalization efforts globally?

Digitalization can be broadly defined to include a range of technologies and applications. I actually prefer the term *information and communications technology* for education (ICT4E) to describe the range of infrastructure (e.g., hardware, software, connectivity) and also the application of and associated training of a range of technologies, including through use of radio and television, across formal and informal educational settings.

When I first started my career in ICT4E in the mid-1990s, there was a lot of talk of “last mile” connectivity and which included our exploring uses of satellite to deliver teacher training instruction. While satellites are still being used to support education in remote areas, the penetration of the Internet and mobile phones and/or mobile coverage over much of the globe is encouraging. When paired with existing mass media infrastructure such as radio and television broadcasts, this also means that access to “education” can take place in a variety of locations including outside of traditional school settings. As a potential infrastructure base for education everywhere, I like to think of there being one mobile phone per household.

One benefit of this is household and school access to open educational resources (OER) that is digitized content that is freely available and often customizable. We recently produced an *EdTech Connected* quarterly eZine on this topic and [highlighted](#) several OER initiatives including the 1000s of free online courses on the [Alison](#) platform, those developed/linked to by [Learning Equality](#) and 1000s of children’s books in a variety of languages on the [Global Digital Library](#) online repository.

Still the impacts of COVID-19 on education systems globally really underscored the lack of equity and access in low-resource settings to many of these same technologies. We still have a long way to go between access to technology, and seeing its *meaningful impact* on learning outcomes including in foundational literacy and numeracy.

While we are starting to deepen the evidence base, including through the work of institutions such as the [EdTechHub](#) and significant investments by donors and Ministries of Education, it is essential for schools to be supported through an evidence-driven approach for sustainable and appropriate technology utilization. This includes appreciating that simply acquiring the technology only represents a fraction of the total cost for implementation which also includes training, maintenance, content selection and monitoring of impact.

Most significantly, can the school show parents that investing in particular tech interventions will/has led to tangible improvements in learning outcomes in specific subject areas?

Today, the pandemic has led to a renewed emphasis on digitalization. What have you seen as major changes?

As noted above, the pandemic underscored the lack of equity in digital access across and within countries. On the connectivity side, a positive response to this was the launch of the [Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education](#) which occurred on the last day of the RewirED Summit that took place in December in Dubai. Developed by [UNESCO](#) in partnership with [Dubai Cares](#) and a number of other institutions, the Declaration provides a framework to ensure that connected technology better supports the right to education, drawing on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Declaration reflected the inputs of a 22-person expert advisory group (which included mEducation Alliance representatives) and a global consultation process involving governments, civil society, youth, teachers, researchers, private sectors organizations, and other stakeholder groups to put forward principles and commitments to establish directions and priorities for the digital transformation of education. The Declaration is just one example of global recognition for the importance of connectivity – paired with evidence of impact – to be more equally accessible across the globe.

On the content side, we are also excited to see many for-profit companies entering into the digital education space, particularly for developing countries, and advancing products that help self-directed learning. An exciting example of this is [Enuma](#), one of the winners of the [Global Learning XPrize](#) in 2019. [Enuma](#), is a digital early education start-up, and their product, Enuma School, is a mobile-based self-directed learning application for foundational literacy, English, and math. They recently entered into the Indonesia market with Sekolah Enuma designed for Indonesian children to learn foundational skills up to a 2nd grade level at school or at home, even if adults are not available to support their learning. Taking into consideration the local IT infrastructure, their associated app works even without internet connection and can work on lower cost tablets and smartphones.

How is the mEducation Alliance itself advancing K12 education?

The term “personalization” is often used to describe the use of AI or machine learning to provide a more customized experience for individual learners. At the Alliance, our vision of “personalization” is actually using

technology to more effectively connect institutions and individuals together to share information, extend the network effect of “educators”, and, more generally, strengthen the dialogue among stakeholders in the K-12 education ecosystem.

The Alliance itself is a network of 45 organizations with common interest in supporting EdTech, but we have also established networks of literacy app developers (i.e., [Literacy League](#)) and global math champions (e.g., [Math Power!](#)) to increase dialogue and professional development exchanges among these communities to impact their work globally and locally.



Photo: 2017 mEducation Alliance Symposium.

The Alliance is also well known for organizing physical and global Symposia bringing together policymakers, practitioners, researchers, implementing organizations working at the ground level, and hosts of other contributors to share information together. Our last [Symposia](#) in 2021 was focused on *EdTech for Accelerating Foundational Literacy and Numeracy in Low-Resource Context*. At this virtual event, we featured over 145 presentations from 38 countries.

Could you tell us more about your Afghan Kids Support Hub and Math Game Youth Ambassadors Program?

In response to the Afghan refugee crisis in the United States, the Alliance expanded its programs to support Afghan refugee learners. This has included rapidly setting up a resource repository of hundreds of children’s books in Dari and Pashto along with other educational resources for K-12 learners on our [Afghan Youth Support Hub](#) site and connecting these resources to the refugee relief efforts of a variety of institutions and organizations supporting these learners including refugee, faith-based and local libraries and the efforts of service groups such as Rotary and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers.

Another activity we are advancing for Afghan refugees is our Math game youth ambassadors program where we are using tech and non-tech platforms to highlight game instructions and train those working with Afghan youth – and the youth themselves, to serve as peer educators of other youth in low-cost, non-tech math games including those involving dice, card decks and low cost tabletop games such as chess. In fact, we will be rolling our math game youth ambassadors program globally in a few

months to further the role of youth and kids themselves in content creation and peer education activities.



Photo: Afghan Kids Support Hub.

What was your own journey? How did you end up working in this field?

I have been working in the field of technology for development for close to 25+ years and which has included working as a distance education specialist for the World Bank for 11.5 years, as Peace Corps technology for development specialist for 3 years, at USAID for 11 years, and now running the mEducation Alliance. However, my initial path to these positions were certainly not straight-forward. When I first came to Washington DC in 1991, I worked for a non-profit, Common Cause, that focused on campaign finance reform. One of the tasks I was given was to serve as the administrator for an online platform connecting our state offices together. That planted the seeds for me to be interested in technology as a force for networking and social good. It so happened that Ann, my girlfriend at that time, now my wife of 25 years, was interested in international development, particularly in Africa, so I became interested as well. One thing led to another and here I am.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I am really interested in helping kids around the world obtain opportunities for quality education -- including their own contributions to helping others get educated in their communities. It is such a tragedy that even prior to COVID-19, hundreds of millions of learners lacked access to quality education, particularly around foundational literacy and numeracy knowledge. A few years ago my wife, kids, and I spent two weeks volunteering as math game tutors at [Chikumbuso](#), a community school in Zambia. During this period of time, we introduced the teachers and students to a number of non-tech math games including organizing math dice tournaments. I remember how much fun the kids had playing math dice with and against each other and this has served as inspiration of a number of the Alliance’s Math Power! activities.