The Commonwealth of Learning in Africa

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to tell you what a small intergovernmental development agency, based here in Vancouver, is doing in Africa. Our work is a microcosm of the development challenges facing Africa. I shall tell you what the Commonwealth of Learning is and does before I give you highlights of our work in Africa.

What is COL?

The Commonwealth of Learning - I shall call it COL - is an intergovernmental agency of the Commonwealth. Its mission is to help developing countries use a variety of technologies and new approaches to expand the scope, scale and impact of learning and not only learning in the formal school and college system. We consider that all forms of development require people to learn new things. The learning challenge in Africa is so massive that traditional approaches simply cannot meet it. In other aspects of life when we are challenged to increase the scale of provision of products and services we turn to technology. COL applies technology to learning.

COL was set up 20 years ago when the Commonwealth Heads of Government held their biennial meeting here in Vancouver. They foresaw the challenge of scaling up education, training and learning to meet the needs of their growing populations and developing economies and they believed that technology could help. They were already talking of a communications revolution. The Heads of Government felt that the media were too important to be left to the entertainers and computers were too powerful to be restricted to business and administration.
So they set up the Commonwealth of Learning. Because the decision had been taken in Vancouver, the governments of Canada and British Columbia competed hard and successfully in the ensuing 'beauty contest' that decided where the agency would be located.

COL is funded primarily by voluntary contributions from Commonwealth governments. The number of countries supporting us has risen from 27 to 38 over the last two years, so we must be doing something right. Our largest donors, who have seats on our board of governors, are Canada, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. The government of British Columbia also supported us until the provincial economy here hit a wobble in the early part of this decade. Now that it seems to have recovered we hope that BC will join in again, since we are the only global intergovernmental agency located here.

COL is a small agency with 35 staff in Vancouver and 5 in our unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia. We are not a donor agency but provide technical assistance so that countries can build up their own capacity and systems for using technology to expand learning.

**What is COL's programme?**

What does this mean in practical terms? The theme of our Plan for 2006-09 is *Learning for Development*. We define development as the process of increasing the freedoms that people can enjoy. Concretely that agenda includes the UN's Millennium Development Goals and the Commonwealth's objectives of peace, democracy, equality and good governance.

The means that we use for expanding learning for development are distance education and appropriate technologies. We group our work into three sectors of activity: **learning for livelihoods**, **human environment** and **education**. Our outputs are policies for the use of learning technologies, improved learning systems, models for the effective use of technology and learning materials for global use.

Open and distance learning, coupled with the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs), is playing a central role in addressing needs in Africa. It has shown its effectiveness in increasing access to education speedily, economically and effectively for large numbers of people. And the numbers are indeed large. Most Africans are aged below 20 and there are hundreds of millions of teenagers and young adults seeking livelihoods. This young population, if given adequate education and training, can become a rich human resource asset. Without them they will be a problem for themselves, for their countries and for the world in general.

**Learning for Livelihoods**

So let me begin with our work on **learning for livelihoods**. COL has an agreement with the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in support of technology-mediated education and training to improve livelihoods.

Our first area of emphasis is training the teachers and trainers. For instance, we helped the University of Technology of Jamaica to develop a distance learning diploma programme for technical and vocational teachers that now been adopted in Ghana. We are working in partnership with the 120-member, 17-country Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa to promote policy and practice in
technology-mediated learning. As a result, our institutions in Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Zambia expect to complete policies by the middle of this year.

This trend to using distance learning is Africa wide and institutions in Botswana, Namibia and Tanzania are reviewing it as a means to teach foundation-level courses in hairdressing and beauty therapy. The ECOWAS Commission is collaborating with COL to develop content materials using Open Educational Resources to offer a certificate course in Community Health Nursing in West Africa. This answers a massive need.

At the nitty-gritty level we have trained course developers from Ghana, The Gambia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone to convert basic skills courses to distance learning formats through collaboration on our WikiWikiEducator. Mauritius is developing a framework for the recognition of prior learning in technical and vocational education and training at the certificate level. The pilot project involves The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Mauritius, Seychelles and South Africa.

All these activities are linked in some way to the formal education and training sector. More far-reaching, perhaps, is our attack on the first Millennium Development Goal, which is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

Our flagship programme, Life Long Learning for Farmers, is developing technology-based teaching and learning models for the sustained improvement of rural livelihoods. It is extending to more and more rural communities, often by self-replication, helping them to develop poverty-reduction programmes. The movement began in India and communities in Kenya, Mauritius and Nigeria are now joining in.

The challenge of development has to be tackled in the rural areas. So COL is focusing on building the capacity to organise technology-mediated learning within those national and international bodies that have mandates and resources for education, training and research in the food and agriculture sectors.

We believe that we are contributing to a paradigm shift in the way agricultural education is conducted so that it really can travel the last mile to the millions of farmers and smallholders all over Africa. Last year COL convened an event in Nairobi where participants from Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia collaborated on the development of Open Agricultural Educational Resources.

Human Environment

In the area of the human environment our main activities are aimed at improving health.

By collaborating with the World Health Organization, COL is equipping and training government agencies, NGOs and community groups to use video and audio technology for local production of educational materials related to health, welfare and community development. We are doing this in The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Swaziland and Tanzania. Health awareness is being raised. The Gambia reports declining HIV prevalence rates as a direct result of COL's initiatives in that country.
As this implies, we believe strongly in empowering ordinary people to use media for community purposes. Our Media Empowerment programme focuses on radio, television, video and audio production. The programme's impact has been to empower local communities, organisations and institutions with appropriate skills and technology that allows stakeholders to address education, environment and agricultural issues with locally created training and information. Over the past decade, the programme has implemented and sustained field-based activities in over 25 countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

Now that governments have suddenly become more relaxed about issuing licences for community radio we are also very busy coping with the demand for help in launching such stations.

Education

In our education sector our priorities are Quality Assurance, Teacher Education and Open Schooling. Across Africa issues of quality are becoming as important as issues of access as countries realise there is no point in expanding schooling unless there are useful learning outcomes. We are also assisting in the renewal of Africa's universities. Last year I myself spent two weeks helping the University of Ghana and other colleagues were involved with the University of South Africa.

Africa needs millions of new teachers in the next decade and technology must come to the rescue here too. COL is working with a consortium on school-based teacher training materials in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. A distance learning Green Teacher course in environment education from India is being adapted for use in Nigeria.

Probably the hottest development right now is what we call open schooling. As the campaign for Universal Primary Education achieves success, a tidal wave of teenagers and young adults are looking for secondary education and not finding it.

COL is in the forefront of the movement to expand open schooling, which is the combination of open and distance learning and local study centres. We have helped establish a consortium for this in southern Africa involving Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, Tanzania and Zambia, and we are doing the same in West Africa.

Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

Finally, I must mention an exciting activity we are coordinating on behalf of the ministers of education of the Commonwealth. Two-thirds of Commonwealth countries are small states and they worry about being left behind in today's e-world.

Their answer is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which is a collaborative consortium of governments and institutions in the small states. All eight of the Commonwealth's small states in Africa are taking part and I shall be going to Seychelles at the end of the month to launch a course development workshop on fisheries.
Already we have held similar workshops in Mauritius for Tourism and Entrepreneurship, in Singapore for Teacher Education, in Trinidad and Tobago for Life Skills and in Samoa for Disaster Management. At each workshop participants from up to twenty small states acquire the skills to develop course material collaboratively online. During the three-week workshop they produce a significant corpus of material, which they continue to develop collaboratively when they get home. This then enriches the course offerings of their tertiary institutions.

Quite apart from the content output, this work is throwing a wide bridge across the digital divide for these small countries.

Conclusion

Time has only allowed me to give highlights of COL's work in Africa. However, I hope I have shown you that a small intergovernmental agency based in Vancouver, helped by its large diaspora of collaborators around the world, is thoroughly engaged with Africa. We believe that learning is the key to development and that our work is helping many African countries to develop technology-based learning systems that can respond to their need for cost-effective education and training at scale.