Transcript

I am delighted to be back in Sri Lanka for the second time this year and I greet you all, most especially the farmers who are with us, on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning.

This is the third of these ceremonies that I have attended. In 2007 I went to Hambantota to launch the Welligatte Lifelong Learning for Farmers project that is under the aegis of the University of Colombo. The central thrust of the project is to help farmers grow sour bananas from tissue culture. That visit marked me. I was amazed by way that L3 Farmers was increasing farmers’ incomes and highly impressed by the way that local women, fresh from high school, were doing the high-technology work of producing tissue cultures in sterile laboratories.

Last year I went to Batticaloa, where the Eastern University is leading the L3 Farmers project that focuses on mixed vegetable farming. There I was inspired by the way that the farmers had formed themselves into an association and the enthusiasm with which they were using information and communications technology (ICT) in support of their work.

Today we launch the L3 Farmers project in mushroom farming that is already well under way here under the guidance of the University of Ruhuna. I thank the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mendis and all the staff of the Faculty of Agriculture for their engagement with the project.

There are two more L3 Farmers projects in other parts of the country led by the Open University and the University of Jaffna respectively. I have promised Professor Uma Coomaraswamy that I will return next year and help formally to launch those.

The Commonwealth of Learning is very proud of the L3 Farmers model. We now see growing evidence that it can lead to a renaissance of interest in farming, a significant increase in prosperity, and the unleashing of creativity and inventiveness in rural communities. The secret of the model is that it has a common aim everywhere; it uses similar principles in each project, but is implemented in a way that matches local needs and possibilities.

The common aim is to improve the prosperity of rural communities. The world will never achieve its
development goals unless people in the rural areas can have a satisfactory standard of living and find fulfillment in their work.

The similar principles used by L3 Farmers projects everywhere are: first, that the project be driven by the vision of the local community for its own development; second, that those who have useful information provide it in support of those visions; third, that local resources, notably the banking system, are used to nourish the projects; and fourth, that appropriate technologies be used to link farmers to the information providers and the wider world.

Within those principles implementation varies greatly. Just here in Sri Lanka you have five different approaches to creating more value through agriculture. The role of the information providers here is not the same as in India. The technologies used for communication vary around the world from ICT kiosks to community radio; and banking systems are not the same from country to country. This combination of common general principles with locally relevant implementation is a reason for the success of L3 Farmers.

We have seen the benefits that L3 Farmers is already generating here in southern Sri Lanka. Mr. Shantha Kumara told us that he would no longer consider taking a pensionable government job because he derives a greater income from farming mushrooms and also finds the work more interesting. His farmer colleague, Mr. Dharmadasa, said that he is excited by the opportunities to experiment and develop value-added products from the mushrooms. Both farmers said how empowered they are by the contact with the University and the use of ICT.

There are two ways to use technology to add value and I found it interesting that the two farmers have each chosen one of them. Mr. Kumara is operating at scale with 4,000 grow bags going at any one time. Mr. Dharmadasa has chosen differentiation: experimenting with growing mushrooms from both ends of the bag and developing value-added products from the mushrooms.

As well as notably improving the income of the farmers the project is having other spin-offs. I was impressed by Professor Rohan Rajapakse’s comment that L3 Farmers is solving the perennial problem that few of the results of the massive enterprise of agricultural research worldwide ever reach the small farmers. He told us that he intends to use his role as head of the Council for Agricultural Research Policy to infuse all agricultural extension work with the spirit and principles of L3 Farmers.

I also note from Mr. Kumara’s comments that L3 Farmers is making agriculture a more attractive option for young people. This is very important. In some of the countries where COL works the average age of farmers is nearly 60 years. Unless youth find agriculture to be an attractive livelihood the food security of the world is at risk with more and more land lying fallow.

Finally, the project seems to unleash the latent creativity of the human spirit. We could see Mr. Dharmadasa’s obvious excitement at experimenting with ways of increasing yields and inventing new products.
I conclude that we are off to a good start. The challenge now is to ensure sustainability and continuity. There we are helped by the fact that COL is not a donor agency and this is not a donor project. It has been created by organizing local inputs in new ways. That in itself is a promising approach – not just for sustainability but for encouraging the self-replication of the project as others see its advantages and copy it. The key is to increase community ownership of the project while at the same time retaining the involvement of the University, which the farmers clearly value greatly.

The aim of L3 Farmers project is to be self-directed, self-sustaining and self-replicating.

Let me end by paying tribute to Professor Uma Coomaraswamy. She has been a good friend of the Commonwealth of Learning for many years and we recognized her global contribution to open and distance learning by making her an honorary fellow of COL last year. Today, in her retirement, she is doing a wonderful job of coordinating the five L3 Farmers projects here in Sri Lanka and possibly developing new ones. I note that some of her former botany pupils are involved in the project, one of whom, Professor Kshanika Hirumburegama is now the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Colombo but earlier was the brains behind the Welligatte L3 project.

Thanks to Professor Coomaraswamy’s status she has got the vice-chancellors of all the participating universities to engage thoroughly with L3 Farmers. It has been a pleasure to hear Vice-Chancellor Mendis express his commitment to the role of Ruhuna University in this initiative today.

I thank you all. I now formally launch L3 Farmers at the University of Ruhuna with every good wish for its success.