

# *The Role of Open and Distance Learning in Meeting the MDGs: A Global Perspective*

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*Presented by  
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## **Introduction**

It is a great pleasure to be back in Tanzania, to thank you for the very warm welcome you have given me wherever I have gone, and to bring you greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning.

I was last here in 2002 when Tanzania did such a nice job hosting the MINEDAF meeting of African Ministers of Education and I was Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO. At that time I was able to fulfil my longstanding ambition to visit the Open University of Tanzania because I had known Professor Mmari for many years.

I am delighted to visit the University again and to get to know the distinguished new Vice-Chancellor, Professor Tolly Mbwette. I am impressed by way that the Open University has grown in breadth and depth since my last visit.

I am also honoured to have the opportunity to meet Ministers in the Government of Tanzania. This visit is very timely because on my return to COL headquarters in Vancouver we shall present our strategic plan to the Board. Once the Board has approved our overall strategy we shall work with each Commonwealth country to decide what COL can most usefully do in that country in the next three years.

My visit here is a good chance to reflect first on what COL has done to help Tanzania in the past. I would then like to hear about Tanzania's aspirations for the use of information and communications technology and open/distance learning in its education and training systems in the future. This will lead into discussions what COL can best do to help Tanzania in the three year period from 2006-09.

COL works in a 3-year planning cycle that fits with the 3-yearly meeting of the Commonwealth Education Ministers. When they last met in Edinburgh in 2003 they approved and funded our present plan. They will meet again in Cape Town in December. Our aim is not only to present COL's overall strategic plan but to have agreed with each country, including Tanzania, the future focus of our work in that country. This visit is a great opportunity to begin those discussions.

But today you have asked me to talk more generally and my title is *The Role of Open and Distance Learning in Meeting the MDGs: A Global Perspective*. I shall start by asking what we mean by development. What is the basic idea behind the Millennium Development Goals that figure in my title? I shall then ask about the role of learning in development and argue that it is a fundamental building block of development on all dimensions. Indeed, the title of COL's Plan for 2006-09 is simply *Learning for Development*.

The challenge that motivates our work is that conventional methods of education and training simply cannot meet the massive need for learning in support of development. Technology is transforming other areas of life and it is time to use it to improve radically the scope and scale of learning.

I shall describe four models for the use of technology in learning that countries around the Commonwealth are using in support of development goals. Thinking in terms of models makes you identify the essential components in the way that you are putting technology and people together. That is essential if you want to apply the model somewhere else because it helps you know whether it is suitable for the new environment. I shall give examples of such attempts at transfer.

Assessing suitability is particularly essential for COL because we are not a donor agency. Our aim is to foster development without donors. Therefore we are always trying to find and develop models that can replicate themselves from country to country using only - or primarily - local resources.

## What is Development?

So let me go back to the beginning. What is development? You must have thought deeply about this question over the years since Tanzania's independence.

I believe that need look no further than the title of Amartya Sen's inspiring book *Development as Freedom*. He says that development and human rights are two sides of the same coin. Development means simply expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Sen also points out that freedom is also what makes development happen. It is primarily through the free agency of people that development is achieved. Free people devote more energy to the development of their families, their communities and their countries than those who are not free.

When I say that COL promotes development without donors, I mean that our aim is to empower people with the learning that makes them agents of development. So according to Sen, the expansion of freedom is both the primary purpose and the principal means of development. What kinds of freedom are we talking about? We can distinguish between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'.

The first freedom from is freedom from hunger. You cannot concentrate on much else if you worry constantly where your next meal is coming from. Hunger is a direct manifestation of poverty. Taking

people out of abject poverty helps to free them from hunger and gives them other freedoms as well, notably some freedom from being pushed around by others and from having most of life's decisions made for them.

The second freedom from is freedom from disease. It is hard for people to fulfil their potential if they are constantly sick. It is hard to develop a community if its members are constantly sick.

The next freedom is the freedom to live with a minimum of dirt, smoke and germs. There seems to be a paradox here. In rich parts of the world individual people consume more than their share of the earth's resources but live in nice clean environments with fresh water in the taps, clean air to breathe, and no piles of garbage to trip over. In developing countries individuals make fewer demands on resources but often have to live besides heaps of garbage, breathe foul air and make do with dirty water.

I'm sure that you can think of other 'freedoms from', but there are also 'freedoms to'. The freedom to be treated as an equal to other members of society, especially the freedom for men and women to be treated as equals. There is the freedom to be educated, the freedom to choose who governs you, the freedom to express yourself, and the freedom to practice your religion. No doubt you can think of more 'freedoms to' as well, but this list of 'freedoms from' and 'freedoms to' begins to define what we mean by 'development'.

The challenge is to express these freedoms as concrete aims that we can work towards. At the Commonwealth of Learning we do this by bringing together three frameworks of goals.

First, there are the Millennium Development Goals, which set targets for progress towards freedom from hunger and poverty, freedom from disease, freedom from pollution, the freedom to be equal and the freedom to be educated. Defining the freedom to be educated was taken further in the Dakar Goals of Education for All, or EFA. There are six goals for EFA, which cover all levels of education from early childhood to adult learning and skills training. Finally, a number of the other 'freedoms to' are embraced in the key goals espoused by the Commonwealth: the freedom to live in peace, the freedom of democracy, the freedom of equality before the law, and the freedoms that flow from good governance. COL defines its work by combining these three frameworks.

In our Plan for 2006-09 we boil these sets of goals down into three sectors of activity to guide our work. The three sectors are Education, Learning for Livelihoods, and Human Environment. In our Logic Model we identify the outputs that we try to achieve in each sector, classifying them as policies, systems or models and materials.

I shall take the three sectors in reverse order. For each I shall explain what development goals the sector covers and why mass learning is crucial to achieving them. Then I shall give one example of how technology, notably the techniques and approaches of distance learning, can help to provide learning opportunities on the scale required.

## Human Environment

In the human environment sector we include the Commonwealth goal of equality and the MDG on gender parity and gender equity. When I was at UNESCO gender equity meant primarily getting girls into school but in parts of the Commonwealth there is also a serious problem of male underachievement.

This sector also includes governance, where we help to scale up public sector training, for example of electoral officials. This sector also includes our work in environmental education, which is mainly focused in India at the moment but will soon spread around the Commonwealth through the distance learning Green Teacher diploma that we have developed and tested with India's Centre for Environmental Education. That may be of interest here in Tanzania. The last element, which I shall concentrate on today, is health.

Three MDGs are concerned with freedom from disease: freedom from dying in infancy; freedom from dying while giving birth; and freedom from avoidable diseases like AIDS, malaria and polio. Freedom from abject poverty is a start towards achieving the health freedoms. The freedom to be educated and trained also helps in attaining the freedom of better health.

Clearly, improving health services is important for reaching these goals. But achieving them also depends on people learning how to avoid disease and keep themselves and their children healthy. They must have information that they can understand: not just because it is presented in their own language, but because it is rooted in their culture - even if it challenges some of the habits of that culture.

This is the basis of COL's Media Empowerment programme. The idea is simple - most good models for using technology are! We believe that messages about avoiding disease and keeping well will be most effective if they are developed and put out by local people. The most powerful medium for this is a mass medium: TV or video. So the challenge is simply to equip a suitable local group with video equipment: camera, editing suite, projector and so on, and train them to use it in an effective and sustained way.

I can give a recent example from Tanzania that has just been started by my colleague David Walker. The aim is to help Tanzania tackle the challenge of HIV/AIDS, a development disaster that risks wiping out the development gains that you have already made. David's first task was to find a suitable local group. To find a suitable group in a country he consults the World Health Organisation, which knows both the health situation in each country and the Non-Governmental Organisations that are working to improve it. Here in Tanzania they identified the Christian Social Services Commission as the people to work with. David equipped and trained them last November and they can now produce videos of health messages.

How do we scale up the impact of the videos that such NGOs produce? For that COL has developed a model that we call Village Cinema. Again, it is very simple. You go into a village, hang up a sheet between two trees, wait until it is dark and then project the videos using a small diesel generator if there is no other power.

We have most experience of using this model in The Gambia. There almost 50% of the entire population of the country has seen village cinema presentations about AIDS and malaria produced by a local NGO that COL has trained. The Government of the Gambia believes that the effect of this initiative has been to arrest the increase of HIV infections and increase dramatically the number of families avoiding malaria by using insecticide treated bed nets.

You may not immediately think of this combination of Media Empowerment and Village Cinema as distance learning, but the name doesn't matter. It is an effective way of using technology to scale up learning in support of development. I hope that it will be effective in helping you tackle AIDS in Tanzania.

## Learning for Livelihoods

Let me now turn to the second of COL's development sectors and give an example from that. We call that sector learning for livelihoods and it tries to address the most crucial of all development goals, the elimination of poverty and hunger. That is the first of the Millennium Development Goals, to halve, between 2000 and 2015, the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those who are hungry.

That means that the first step in development is to increase the income of the poorest people, in other words to improve their livelihoods. Literacy training and most forms of education improve people's livelihoods but COL is always seeking the most direct link possible between learning and livelihoods. We believe that the place to start is with the farmers in the rural areas. If we can improve the livelihoods of the tens of millions of farmers and smallholders in the developing world we shall transform the rural economy and with it the prosperity of the whole world.

The model of Media Empowerment that I have just described can be useful here too and COL has equipped the agricultural extension departments of the governments of Jamaica and Grenada with video equipment just as we have done here for health. There are never enough extension workers and the videos multiply the impact of their work, as well as being more interesting for the farmers.

But I want to talk today about another model, which we call Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3Farmers for short. This takes a deeper look at the rural economy and involves more of its components. We start from the premise that a way must be found to give farmers easier access to information and knowledge that could help them increase their livelihoods. Even where they exist, agricultural extension services are too understaffed to address the challenge. The result is that the wealth of information resulting from agricultural research and development fails to travel the last mile to where it is most needed, the villages of the developing world.

In the last few years many villages in India have been equipped with ICT kiosks as a result of government interventions or commercial initiatives. Since each kiosk provides its village with internet and telephone connections COL wondered whether these kiosks might help to carry useful information that last mile to each farmer. We began by studying the introduction of the ICT kiosks in four regions of India and found that they not had as big an impact as hoped. The reason for the low impact was that they had been put into the villages in a top-down manner without involving local communities.

So the first principle we adopted was to mobilise the farmers, to get them to form an association and create a vision of development for their village. Our role is then to help them achieve that vision. The vision includes their view of how their farming might yield better livelihoods. It might be acquiring better livestock, growing new crops, or simply improving the process of marketing their produce. That produces questions - often rather simple questions. How do I identify a good cow? How do I keep wild boars off my land when they are a protected species?

The next step is to get the information providers to work together to answer these questions. In the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, for example, we helped to create a consortium of the Agricultural University, the Open University, the Veterinary University, a large Engineering University and the University of Madras

for questions with a social science element. These institutions had been used to operating separately and were not having much impact on the farmers. Now they work together.

The ICT kiosks are used to link the farmers to the consortium. These are commercial ICT kiosks and we prefer it that way because it makes the operation sustainable and creates another stakeholder, the kiosk operator, who has an interest in providing information of value that the farmers are prepared to pay for, such as very local weather forecasts.

The fourth key element is to involve the commercial banks. In India the banks are under pressure from government to increase rural lending but the record of repayment has been poor. However, the banks felt that the L3 Farmers system gave them a better assurance of repayment and so they became thoroughly involved, not just in making loans, but in getting other businesses involved to improve the marketing of the produce.

So, to give a concrete example, the farmers in a village near the town of Theni in Tamil Nadu formed an association and decided that improving dairy production was their best route to greater prosperity. Their key question to the information providers was 'how do I tell a good milk cow from a poor milk cow?' The specialists worked together and came up with a check list with diagrams which the women of the village, who have learned some web programming, made into an instructional sequence on the computer in the ICT kiosk.

The bank loaned money to the farmers to improve their dairy cows, some \$US 200,000 so far, and also brought in a dairy company from the nearby town which agreed to buy a guaranteed quantity of milk and take it to market provided that the farmers agreed to meet certain quality standards.

The net result is a more prosperous and happy village; banks that are so pleased with the results that they are replicating the system in other villages without COL's involvement, and ICT kiosk operators who are making a living too.

This is not conventional open and distance learning, but it is a successful way of improving the rural economy. It is technology assisted learning for development. Media Empowerment and L3 Farmers do not deliver old educational material in new ways: they put people, technology and knowledge together in new ways to create new learning processes.

This approach seems to fit well with your own National Strategy for Growth and Poverty Reduction, MKUKUTA, which targets agricultural development as a key priority. We should be delighted to work with you in adapting the L3 Farmers approach to your context.

Let me conclude with two more examples of powerful models that use technology to reconfigure relationships between people and institutions to create new forms of learning. I turn to COL's third and biggest sector, Education.

## Education

Here you all know about the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education, which is to ensure that all boys and girls complete primary school. The major bottleneck to the achievement of

universal primary education is the training and retraining of tens of millions of teachers. In the Commonwealth, there are 20 million teachers. Many of them need further training to be effective.

Millions of new teachers must be recruited and trained as countries seek to expand education with a teaching force that is shrinking through retirement, migration and AIDS. Conventional methods of teacher education are not up to the scale of the challenge. ODL has already proven its effectiveness for training teachers in many countries. A number of colleagues in Tanzania have been involved in COL's drive to extend the use of distance learning in teacher training.

However, I want to talk about two other models for harnessing technology to learning: Open Schooling and Open Universities.

Open Schooling is the application of ODL at the school level; particularly the secondary school level, and is a very important activity for COL. The Millennium Development Goal focuses on Universal Primary Education but the Dakar Goals of Education for All and COL's interest go much wider. In COL's Education Sector we attempt not only to promote the achievement of Universal Primary Education through the training of teachers by ODL but also to address the consequence of achieving Universal Primary Education, which will be to send a tidal wave of children towards secondary school.

The countries that struggle to achieve primary education will certainly not be able to satisfy the growing demand for secondary education by conventional means and building schools, which is where open schooling comes in. Open schools go back much longer than open universities. Countries like New Zealand, Australia and Canada had open schools more than fifty years ago. However, it was the creation of the National Open School in India in the 1970s that began the modern era of open schooling. Today India's National Institute for Open Schooling has over a million children on its rolls and countries in Africa, as well as the states of India now seek to emulate its success.

What is the model? As you will have gathered by now, I am particularly interested in identifying the underlying models in the applications of technology to education. So how does the open school model differ from the open-university model?

First, secondary schoolchildren require more personal contact with tutors and facilitators than do university students, so there is greater emphasis on local centres. Second, open schools are directed as much at youngsters beyond school age who want to complete their school diplomas as they are at school-age children who cannot find a conventional school. Third, many of their pupils are disadvantaged in various ways: some have part-time employment, some have disabilities, some are homeless, and so on.

This means that when open schools say they use open and distance learning, they must emphasise the 'open' even more than the 'distance'. Pupils must be able to come in and out, fitting their studies with their often difficult lives. From this has developed a fourth feature of open schools, namely that their study centres are often run by the NGOs that take a special interest in disadvantaged children.

This creates a win-win situation. The open school has a ready made network of study centres run by organisations and people that really care about the children, and the NGOs, through the open school materials, have a way of giving the children they serve a much richer educational experience.

Many countries are now interested in creating or re-invigorating open schools, so this is a model of learning for development that will keep COL busy in the years ahead. Colleagues from Tanzania took part in a COL Forum on Open Schooling held in Botswana in 2004 and also in a two-week course on open schooling held in India in the same year. We are eager to support your own attempts to extend open schooling through the Institute for Adult Education.

Finally, I must say a word about open universities, which were one of the first large-scale applications of technology to education that had a major impact starting over 30 years ago. It is a pleasure for me to visit the Open University of Tanzania again, because it is an excellent example of the application of this powerful model. I shall analyze it as a model.

Governments want education to meet three criteria. They want it to be accessible to large numbers, they want to keep the cost as low as possible, and they want education of quality.

I put these vectors together in what I call the iron triangle. Iron; because until recently it is been a severe constraint - a straitjacket - on the expansion of education. That is because, with traditional classroom teaching, it is hard to change any side of the triangle for the better without making the others worse. Put more students in class to increase access and people will say quality is going down. You may have heard the cry 'more means worse'. Reduce investment in education to cut cost and you may reduce access and quality. Invest in quality through better teachers or materials and costs will go up. These trade-offs have reduced access to education throughout history.

Open universities are revolutionary because they recast the iron triangle. They allow you to increase access, increase quality and cut costs - all at the same time. This has never happened in education before.

How do open universities do this? The key is the use of media for study materials and the economies of scale that this gives you. Even with old media, such as print and books, it costs little to produce the thousandth or ten-thousandth copy. It costs almost nothing for an extra person to tune into a radio or TV broadcast or to visit a website. Copying CDs and DVDs is also cheap.

This also promotes quality. If you are going to sell a lot of copies of a book or a DVD you can afford to invest in making them of high quality.

What makes an open university successful? I suggest that there are three ingredients, so you can think of an open university student sitting on a three-legged stool. The first leg is good study materials. Today you can use lots of media for this, audio, video, print, the Web, CDs and DVDs, the Internet and so on. The second leg is good student support. Most students cannot succeed on independent study alone. They need support from teachers or tutors. Some of this can be provided by phone, e-mail or correspondence. Sometimes students get together physically in local groups. The third leg is good logistics. Study materials are no use unless they reach the students. Examinations must be administered, supervised and marked. Often these operations have to be carried out on large scale - ten years ago I coined the term mega-universities for open universities with over 100,000 students. If you operate on that scale even an administrative error that affects only 1% of students means more than a thousand unhappy students.

Let me illustrate this with reference to the open university that I know best, which is the UK's Open University. This is a mega-university with around 200,000 students. When cost comparisons were last

done, operated at between 60% and 80% of the cost per graduate of a conventional UK university. Of special interest here is the reputation for quality that the Open University has achieved. Rankings based on subject-by-subject assessment of teaching quality place the Open University fifth out of the UK's hundred universities, one place above Oxford, where I was a student. Furthermore a recent survey of 170,000 students across all UK universities put the Open University in first place for student satisfaction. That may seem remarkable for students learning at a distance.

What it means is that the UK Open University does a first-rate job on each of the three legs of the stool: materials, support and logistics. I wish the Open University of Tanzania every success as it expands its activities and strives to be the highest quality university in Tanzania along these three dimensions.

## Conclusion

So there it is. The Role of Open and Distance Learning in Meeting the MDGs: A Global Perspective. I hope I have shown you that distance education has a huge role to play in progressing the development agenda and that there are many manifestations of open and distance learning. I have given you just a few of the models that COL is fostering. COL works with its partners to find models for using technology that meet at least three criteria.

First, we look for, or develop applications of technology that are scaleable. The whole point of using technology is to create learning opportunities for many more people. Nearly all development goals require very large numbers of people to learn new things. Conventional face-to-face teaching cannot be scaled up to meet the challenge. Technology is only useful if it can be scaled up.

Second, we want models for using technology that are sustainable. That means the technology must be robust, it must be suited to the environment, and its maintenance and updating must not have to rely on external funding.

Third, it must be locally organised. To begin with, this helps to achieve the goals of scalability and sustainability. Anything that depends on outsiders will be limited in impact and inherently fragile. Local people must take responsibility. This also ensures that the use of technology and the messages and learning that it transmits, will be culturally and linguistically appropriate. You might also say that it nurtures another 'freedom from' - freedom from donor dependency.

Those three goals are essential but we try to aim for a fourth, which is to create a model that is self-replicating. I mean that the application is so obviously effective and powerful that people copy it spontaneously. COL is a small agency that can only act in a very few places. But if people copy the models we put in place we can have a big multiplication effect. COL is not concerned with who gets the credit; we simply want to scale up learning for development.

The kind of development we are seeking is development that increases human freedom in many dimensions. The condition for developing those freedoms is a massive increase in human learning. Conventional methods of teaching are not up to the task. Commonwealth nations have the opportunity to harness the potential of ODL to advance development.

Learning is the common wealth of humankind. Our task is both to increase that wealth and to ensure that is not the private preserve of favoured individuals or institutions but indeed the common wealth of humankind. I wish you all well as you use technology in various ways to increase the wealth of learning in Tanzania.