

Opening Remarks: Africa OER Regional Consultation



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Hon Minister, Excellency, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies & Gentlemen

A very warm welcome to each one of you joining us for the OER regional consultation for Africa. This is the fourth in the series of six consultations being held globally. The Commonwealth of Learning is organising these in partnership with UNESCO, the government of Slovenia, with generous support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Let me begin by thanking the Hon Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun, for her support in hosting the meeting here in Port Louis. Mauritius plays a key role in the Commonwealth and hosted the 18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2012. And for the first time, there was a clear direction in the Communique ‘for the development and use of OER in providing quality teaching and learning for all’.

The Commonwealth has 52 member states that span all regions of the globe, representing the rich diversity of our world. We have eighteen Member States from SSA. As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government with our headquarters in Metro Vancouver and a regional office in New Delhi. Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use technologies for expanding access to quality education and training. COL believes that learning must lead to sustainable development.

Last year the world community adopted the 17 SDGs. SDG 4 aspires to promote equitable and quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. Early reports indicate that more than a hundred countries will fall way behind this target. Therefore innovative approaches are needed to achieve both speed and scale. We believe that OER have a tremendous potential for increasing access and lowering the costs of quality education. The theme of these consultations then is ‘OER for equitable and quality education: from commitment to action’.

Why do we think it’s important to promote OER? In some African countries, as many as 12 children share one reading textbook and 14 children have access to one maths textbook in school. How can OER address the issues of access and equity?

COL was promoting the development and sharing of open content long before the term OER was coined in 2002. For example, COL worked with 140 teachers in 8 southern African countries to develop 46 teacher training modules. This content was uploaded on Afristar and could be downloaded for free use and reuse by anyone anywhere in Africa. Openness has always been part of COL’s DNA.

This is something that we share with our partners UNESCO. Many of you will recall the World OER Congress that we organised jointly in 2012. Our collaboration is based on complementarity and a clear division of labour. For example, UNESCO developed the high level Competency Framework for Teachers and COL created the resources to achieve these competencies. The joint UNESCO-COL publications on OER are used globally and in a number of languages. It's good to see Zeynep at this meeting.

Slovenia is a more recent partner and it has been a great pleasure working with Gaspar Mitya and Davor to plan and implement the regional consultations. Slovenia is playing a leadership role in the OER movement through their Opening Up Slovenia initiative.

Without the support of Hewlett, the 2012 World Congress would not have been possible. Barbara Chow and TJ Bliss came forward to support the regional consultations which will lead up to the second World OER Congress in September this year. Liz Levey is representing Hewlett at this meeting.

COL has worked with several countries in Commonwealth Africa to develop OER policies, build capacity and share content. COL is also supporting three ODL/OER Chairs in Africa working to promote increasing access to quality teaching and learning opportunities. The three big open universities in Africa (in Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania) have institutional OER policies. Such examples need to be adopted by more institutions. COL has developed OER for English Language Teaching which are being used in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and results show a marked improvement in students' learning outcomes.

One key challenge in many developing countries relates to health. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Swaziland believes that having the right number of nurses of good quality can make an important difference in his country. However, training nurses is very expensive mainly because of the cost of learning materials. Over the last two years, a significant volume of new learning materials have been created using free quality content, significantly lowering the costs of training the nurses.

There are many such stories about the positive impact of OER and many will emerge over the next two days. Africa has many OER initiatives. OER Africa, ROER4D, and Siyavula are successful examples that need to be replicated in many countries. In fact, the first major OER statement was the Cape Town Declaration in 2007. The year 2017 is being celebrated all over the world as the Year of Open. Time for all of us to become champions for opening up education for all through OER.

Let me once again thank our hosts, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, our partners UNESCO, Slovenia and Hewlett who have contributed generously to making this event possible. Thanks also to each one of you for travelling long distances to be part of this important initiative.