

# From Data to Difference!



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It's a pleasure to be here and share some examples of how my organisation the Commonwealth of Learning is using data to make a difference. I have prepared this presentation with my colleague, Alexis Carr.

Data powers the world. There is more data available now than there has been at any point in history. An estimated 90% of the world's data has been generated in the last two years alone, and every two days, we create as much data as we did during the entire period from the dawn of civilisation until 2003.

<https://www.undatarevolution.org/report/>

<https://techcrunch.com/2010/08/04/schmidt-data/>

In part, this exponential growth is due to technologies. This graph illustrates the upward trend in the number of surveys and the number of mobile subscriptions, showing how mobile phones are contributing to the increase in data.

Despite the massive increase in data, there are still gaps, particularly in relation to gender. There is a dearth of gender disaggregated data and data on women's lives and experiences. While gender features in 54 of the SDG indicators, only 10 can be monitored at a global level, due to lack of data. This could be a major handicap in achieving gender equality.

But, another equally important concern is what we do with the data we have? It is reported that between 60 and 73 percent of data in the private sector goes unused. Though there is scarce information on the public sector, it is likely that the percentage of unused data may be even higher. What do we need data for? Is it data for data's sake?

This pyramid provides a framework for understanding how data leads to real world change. Data is nothing but facts or observations, which are unorganised and unprocessed. To give data meaning it must be analysed – this leads to information. To generate knowledge, information must be contextualised. To move from knowledge to wisdom we must apply knowledge to the real world. In this sense, data, information and knowledge are about understanding the past and present, while wisdom is about changing the future. How can we ensure that data becomes information, that this information is transformed into knowledge, and that knowledge leads to wisdom for gender equality?

My organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning helps Member States use technologies to expand access to education and training. COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development, and must lead to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. COL not only collects data, but uses it to effect change. How can we move from data to difference?

As Melinda Gates cautioned, “the answers we get are often shaped by the questions we ask.” At COL, gender is integrated in programme design, so that the differential needs and experiences of men and women, boys and girls are considered from the outset. Recognising that the head of a household can be a woman, questions are framed in such a way that women’s voices are heard. If data has to lead to difference it must be gender inclusive.

How data is collected is also important. For example, COL’s lifelong learning for farmers model, active in 11 countries, uses mobile phones to deliver training on agriculture and financial literacy to rural farmers, the majority of whom are women. Apps like m-Omulisima, developed with COL support in Uganda, not only provide a platform for learning, but are a valuable source of data. This data can be analysed to provide insights into how learners are interacting with and benefitting from the project.

In addition, COL uses offline data collection in remote regions, with limited internet access. Offline tools allow data collectors in the field to record responses, which are uploaded once they have connectivity. Appropriate data collection tools are key to ensuring that marginalised voices are captured.

Betty, a widow from Uganda, has five children and is caregiver to five orphans. In 2017, Betty was introduced to the m-omulimisa platform. Through m-omulisima Betty and her widow’s group were trained in seed production, business planning, savings and credit and agribusiness. As a result of the training, her group successfully applied for a loan to expand their seed production. Betty now has a store to sell her seeds and she is constructing a house for rental income. Betty is proud that all her children attend good schools, and she can pay their fees.

Women’s voices may be excluded by the questions we ask (or don’t ask) or they are excluded from the process of asking the questions. Involving local women in data collection helps put respondents and their families at ease and encourages more candid responses to sensitive questions. It also builds the capacity of women as data collectors and partners in the process. On the left, a young woman from a local university in India is surveying rural women about community radio programmes on health and nutrition. To the right, a woman from a partner organisation interviews a participant of a COL programme, aimed at preventing child early and forced marriage.

Having gender inclusive data is only the first step. How do we make sense of this data? Data visualisation tools allow for clear visual presentation and analysis. These digital tools allow us to make comparisons, see trends, patterns, and correlations. This dashboard, for a project on skilling girls, allows COL and other stakeholders to track progress against expected outcomes.

COL’s work on measuring empowerment is an excellent example of how data can be transformed into knowledge. In a study of L3F women in Kenya, empowerment data was collected through surveys. On its own this data did not have much meaning. However, when it was analysed we saw a clear relationship between women’s empowerment and profits – the higher the empowerment the higher the profits--sis a 1% increase in empowerment led to a 2.3 % increase in profit. By applying the existing understanding of context and the role of learning in empowerment, this information became meaningful and the knowledge generated has helped us replicate the model in different contexts.

When we use knowledge and apply lessons learned to make changes for the future, we achieve the state of wisdom. These insights become useful evidence to inform decision-making and can be used to improve the programme.

Another example of moving from knowledge to wisdom is policy advocacy. COL believes that evidence-based advocacy can lead to systemic change. To make a difference in the world, our knowledge must lead

to policy adoption and implementation. Let me share three examples of how COL has leveraged knowledge to effect change.

COL's GIRLS Inspire project uses a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. Through our data we have found that skilling girls can prevent child early and forced marriage. COL and its partners have used this knowledge to lobby parliamentarians to promote access to skills training, and increase the legal age of marriage, in countries where this is still not the case. Here are some policy makers and officials at a meeting in Tanzania, where project outcomes were shared for integrating skills training into national programmes. In Pakistan data, information and knowledge have been shared with parliamentarians to strengthen their role in shaping policy and its effective implementation. Here a young woman from the project is discussing potential linkages to government institutes for employment and income generating opportunities with Pakistan's Minister of Women's Development Department.

COL has supported studies on its L3F model to understand its impact on participants. Working with the National Institute of Bank Management, India studies have shown that the project has a significant social return on investment and every \$ invested has resulted in a return of \$ 16. As a result of evidence-based advocacy banks have agreed to accept learning as collateral – a major innovation – which has had a direct impact on the livelihoods of rural women. This study is now being used to influence the Central Bank of Tanzania to extend loans to the rural poor.

As many Commonwealth countries seek to provide 12 years of quality education to every girl, COL data indicate that the empowerment of the mother is an important determinant in bringing girls to school. As Natalia from Mozambique, a single mother who was married at the age of 17, states “ I am confident that I will positively influence the lives of my children who I will raise up differently from the way my parents raised me, thinking that marriage is the solution to poverty for girls.” To ensure that the girls do come to school, COL is targeting mothers in remote areas to empower them within the family and community to take a stand.

What have these experiences taught us about moving from data to difference?

Gender must be an integral part of a programme: from design, to data collection, to analysis, and advocacy. COL's gender keys are a useful tool to guide gender integration for programme development, implementation and evaluation.

If we start with the wrong questions, we will not get the right data. We must involve women and their concerns in data collection. While digital tools offer immense opportunities, we must place them in their social political and economic contexts. In addition, we need to critically analyse the implications of the information we generate within the context of gender equality to create new knowledge. Finally, not only must we apply lessons learned to our programmes, but must also advocate for policy change at the highest levels.

Thank you