

Promoting Learning for Development



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Transcript

Colleagues

It gives me great pleasure to be at CIDA and I thank you for the opportunity to present the Commonwealth of Learning and its work.

COL is an intergovernmental organisation, established by Commonwealth heads of Government when they met in Vancouver in 1987. We believe that access to learning is the key to development. We are very grateful to the Government of Canada hosting us and for its continued financial and intellectual support.

As you know, the Commonwealth is an association of 54 Member States that cover all regions of the globe.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and Information and Communication Technologies for expanding access to education and training.

While the COL headquarters are in Vancouver, we have a small regional office for Asia in New Delhi.

We are a small organisation and my colleagues represent the diversity of the Commonwealth. In spite of this small group of 10 nationalities, we have activities in 47 of the 54 Commonwealth countries.

What do we do? Technology and distance education have an important role to play in providing access to education and training. We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn helps accelerate progress towards achieving the international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

Using a wide consultative process, COL identifies the key needs of Governments, organisations and institutions and develops three year plans. The strategic goals for 2012-15 include:

- Quality education

- Human resource development
- Harnessing ODL and technology for social and economic development.

The priority for COL during this triennium includes education for girls and women, promoting the use of open education resources or OER and skills development.

We use distance learning as it helps us to increase access, cut costs, improve quality and promote social inclusion.

Distance education costs about one third of what campus education would normally cost, as studies demonstrate.

Distance education can also be of high quality if done effectively, and can produce the same learning outcomes that campus education achieves. For instance, the Open University of the UK ranks fifth among the 100 universities in the country.

COL takes a holistic approach to learning and focuses on increasing access to both formal and non-formal learning opportunities for Commonwealth citizens.

COL organises its work in two sectors: education and livelihoods & health. These two sectors have seven initiatives and two cross-cutting themes. COL has identified five core strategies to implement its work: partnerships, capacity, materials, models and policies.

The Education sector has four initiatives: open schooling, teacher education, higher education, Virtual University for small States of the Commonwealth.

The Livelihoods and Health sector promotes non-formal and informal learning, which include, technical and vocational skills development, lifelong learning for farmers and healthy communities.

COL's cross-cutting themes of eLearning and Gender underpin all our work. Let me give you examples of each of these initiatives.

As countries achieve success in providing universal primary education, there are still significant barriers preventing many young people from entering secondary education - worldwide - 71 million adolescents are not in school. COL works in 26 countries in expanding open schooling to increase learning opportunities for secondary education, particularly for girls, out-of-school youth, and people in remote regions.

The world's largest Open School in India provides education to an average of 300,000 students per year at one tenth the cost, while in Namibia the Open School provides education to 48% of the total Senior Secondary School population in the country.

One of the key obstacles to achieving UPE is the shortfall in teacher supply in most developing countries. 1.7 million additional teachers will be needed if we are to achieve UPE by 2015! It will not be possible to rely on only brick and mortar approaches to address the projected shortfalls in teacher supply. Therefore COL provides support to teacher training institutions to strengthen and expand their programmes through the use of ODL and technology. In 2009-2012 COL collaborated with these institutions to train over

350,000 teachers in 24 countries. This figure includes teachers of marginalised groups such as the nomads in Africa.

Many Commonwealth countries in Asia and Africa are trying to improve the APRs in Higher Education. COL is using distance learning approaches to help achieve this. Just to take one example COL pioneered the development of a Commonwealth executive MBA and MPA programme which enabled our partner institutions to increase the numbers of trained managers and administrators in their countries. The programmes are offered through open universities in developing countries for whom it would have been very difficult to develop on their own, a masters level executive education programme of international quality. To date, more than 21,000 working managers and administrators have benefited from this programme.

Commonwealth Ministers of Education directed COL to establish a Virtual University for the small states, a network of 32 countries. Seven institutions, covering all Commonwealth regions are now offering VUSSC developed courses. As a result of ongoing training programmes, we have built the capacity of more than 11,000 people including educators, policy makers and IT managers. We have also developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework to promote learners' mobility and credit transfer between countries and regions.

This is Eunice Maganga, a young Kenyan woman, who has had the opportunity to gain skills for improving her livelihood through COL's work in skills development in Africa.

We build the capacity of formal post-secondary institutions to offer new, flexible courses for people working in the informal sector, especially women. Through a team of Champions, colleges are strengthening their ICT infrastructure, creating new strategic objectives and building the capacity of their teachers to integrate ICT into their teaching.

As a result, people like Eunice who leave school midstream get a chance to gain skills training. Eunice has always wanted to be a builder like her father. Eunice and 52 others, studied a free course in building technology, made possible by sponsorship of materials from local companies. For their practical work they built a staff house at the college. Eunice now works as semi-skilled labour and has increased her daily income by 150%. Eunice has enrolled for further studies at the college – which she can now pay for – as she wants to become a skilled bricklayer.

This is just one story of how COL's work impacts on improving skills and livelihoods.

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Millions of farm families do not have access to learning in the developing countries. The present agricultural extension system based on face-to-face training is inadequate to address the challenges. COL offers a new approach called Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3F. It mobilises and organises the farmers and links them with banks for financial capital.

It then facilitates their learning using devices such as mobile phones and radios. Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities.

Financial institutions realising that poorer communities and HIV AIDS affected women are potential and valuable clients have started lending and investing in L3F since the repayment rates are very high.

L3F has led to increased income, better food security and empowerment among 75,000 participants in Africa and Asia. A resource-poor Batwa community in Uganda, participating in the L3F project are now able to take 2 meals a day, as opposed to the single meal they could afford previously.

The initiative with high social rate of return has attracted governments and other stakeholders for scaling-up and replication.

The Healthy Communities initiative, helps local organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development. Working with our partners we have developed a model for local, low-cost, participatory communication programmes that address critical unmet community health and development needs.

These photographs are of a learning programme called the Bag of Life in a district of Malawi with extremely high rates of maternal and child mortality. The programme is a collaborative venture between a community network of some 15,000 women, a local health NGO, the district hospital and a community radio. The Bag of Life centres on 60 minutes of weekly audio content that combines information about maternal and child health, i.e. vetted by doctors and nurses, with the voices of local women and their real life stories. Some 3,000 women participate directly in weekly listening and discussion groups. And via FM radio the Bag of Life has the potential to reach 125,000 pregnant women and mothers of children under age 5.

Our evaluation shows that 2/3 of active participants have learned the importance of simple key messages, e.g. to deliver in the hospital or clinic. In perhaps the most powerful illustration of the value of the Bag of Life, over 150 women's groups representing over 2,000 women contribute their own money to keep this programme going. The cost per active listener in the first year was approximately \$5.

Let me share one example of our work in elearning. The Commonwealth Certificate for Teacher ICT Integration or CCTI was developed to implement the UNESCO ICT competency framework. Developed in collaboration with SchoolNet South Africa, this is an advanced course for teachers and school leaders in integrating ICT into school management and teaching and learning. This was localized for Guyana and consists of in-service and pre-service courses. These were developed using OER and are available as OER. The success of the CCTI is that uses an innovative and replicable model that can be customized and adapted to local needs. It is being deployed in 6 Caribbean countries.

Let me give you one example of a technology innovation that we are currently working on. The scene in this slide may be a typical learning situation for many children in developing countries. Classes such as these are far from electric power grids. Internet access is not even thought of as a possibility. Would tech-supported or e-learning mean anything in circumstances like this?

Our answer is yes. The sudden rise of affordable Tablet computers has made it possible to connect learners even in remote areas to experience the power and advantages of connected learning. So we can have a classroom without walls

Today, there is enough computing power in Tablets to make them function as servers. They can run a Learning Management System such as Moodle. Learners can access materials in the server using hand-held tablets.

In the picture here, the white device serves as power source and WiFi hot spot for the black device which is actually a PC. Together these two devices cost just under \$100 and form the core of what COL calls “Classroom Without Walls”.

So what are the lessons that we have learned?

That success depends substantially on partner buy-in from the very outset. It is important to embed COL’s activities in national and institutional plans and that because policy development often takes years to accomplish, COL must be patient and persevere.

Policy advocacy must be based on concrete evidence and rigorous analysis. If we want models to go beyond the pilot phase, there must be an appropriate threshold level beyond which replication can be promoted. Often civil society organisations and private entities which are flexible and have a holistic approach can be more suitable partners in learning for development.

Today COL is well respected across the Commonwealth. What constitutes our success? Let me highlight four key factors.

One, we have a strong country focus and we tailor our programme to suit the needs of Member States. We have an active network of Focal Points, nominated by Ministers of Education in 52 countries and this network not only receives triennial reports of what we have done in each country but also identifies the priorities that COL can address.

Two, we are results-oriented and apply Results Based Management to all our work in order to provide evidence of our outcomes and impact. This has resulted in the doubling of the number of countries that make voluntary contributions to our budget. For instance, in 2006, we had 22 countries contributing while now the number has doubled to 44. There are many countries that make very small contributions, but each contribution, however small, is a measure of confidence in COL.

Three, a small organisation like COL must always earn its place at the table. One way of doing this is to be a recognised thought leader in learning for development. We have extended the frontiers of open and distance learning from academia to the field of development. We are acknowledged leaders in the OER space and organised the World OER Congress last year in collaboration with UNESCO and support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Finally, we try and develop innovative models using technology.

Four, COL demonstrates value for money. By keeping our organisation small, we are able to invest the major part of our budget on the programme work in the field. In addition, we leverage our impact through partnerships with public, private and civil society organisations. Furthermore, we develop models which can be replicated in different contexts, which help us to scale up, reach out and achieve more with less!

In short, COL is a highly focused, results-oriented organisation that has reinvented itself over the years to respond to the needs of its stakeholders. With that let me thank you for your kind attention.