

Promoting Learning for Development



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Transcript

Prof Winnie Mitullah, Dr Rachel Musyoki, Prof Rosemary Atieno, Distinguished Colleagues and Friends

It gives me great pleasure to be at this important meeting of the Lifelong Learning for Farmers and I thank you for the opportunity to present a very important initiative of the Commonwealth of Learning.

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 Kenya for its continued financial and intellectual support.

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. Our slogan is 'Learning for Development'.

Following the ideas of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, COL understands development as freedom. Increasing the freedoms that men and women enjoy is a definition of development, and greater freedom empowers people to be more effective agents of development. Learning must enable people to exercise their freedom 'to be and to do'.

Prof Amartya Sen proposes the capability approach which helps us to see that learning and acquiring skills are not an end in themselves but steps that help individuals and societies achieve development outcomes. This approach encourages us to think beyond outputs such as acquiring a degree to outcomes—how this degree will lead to a better quality of life. It also shifts the focus from developing capacity to capability and to the question—now that we have the capacity, what will we do with it? We develop skills or what Prof Sen calls 'functionings'—how can these enable us to overcome the constraints of our daily existence and make a change for the better?

What are the capabilities that COL must promote through education and training?

Walker investigated the capabilities that girls in school in South Africa thought important and came up with three: personal autonomy and independence of thought; ability to enter the world of work and an identity and a voice that would get respect and recognition.

This is what we mean by learning for development. We believe that giving people the opportunity to learn increases their freedoms ‘to be and to do’ helps accelerate progress towards achieving the international development goals and the Commonwealth values of peace, equality, democracy and good governance.

Technology and distance education have an important role to play in scaling up access to education and training. It is for this reason that COL has consistently advocated for the use of distance learning methods to be adopted not just for formal education but also for non-formal learning.

ICT can play a role as more options are available to farming communities—mobile telephones are the fastest growing sector in both South Asia and sub Saharan Africa. Community radio has had a second coming in India as the government is giving licenses proactively. TV and Internet are increasingly available. But its not just about access to ICT. There are the other issues of connectivity, relevant content in the local languages and culture, which determines who can/not have access such as women and marginalized communities. In addition we have the issues of economic viability, such as the questions of who will support the running costs of the systems. As we know ICT do enable change and add value to the development process. But by themselves they do not create the development process. ICT strategies are only effective, sustainable and worth the effort if they are integrally linked to broader, more comprehensive development, education and poverty reduction strategies.

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. What are some of the basic issues in agricultural extension that are common to many developing Commonwealth countries? First, there is a declining investment by both governments and private providers. Second, the ratio of extension officers to farmers ranges from 1 to 25000 to 1 extension officer for every 2000 farmers. Third, the volatility of global imperatives can disadvantage the farming community as the recent case of the demand for vanilla which was brought to India and then suddenly shifted back to Madagascar, before farmers could react. Fourth, the lack of involvement of the farmers with the financial institutions and markets and finally, the absence of a holistic perspective to agricultural extension.

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. COL catalyses the links between the civil society, institutions and micro-finance institutions to develop multi-media based learning. Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities. This model, which was first successful in India and Sri Lanka, is now taking root in countries in Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean.

As you can see, COL has been promoting learning that leads to development, especially among the most deprived and marginalised. This is a huge task as there are more than 500 million families to reach in the Commonwealth alone. Conventional modes of training will not suffice. What we need is to pool our creativity and spirit of innovation to meet these pressing development challenges through the use of available technologies and approaches.

With that, let me thank you for your kind attention.