Opening Remarks

Seventh Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning Opening Ceremony

3 December 2013, International Conference Centre, Abuja, Nigeria

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Transcript

Your Excellency Miriam Katagum, the Honourable Burchell Whiteman, Vice-Chancellor Tenebe, Prof Olu Jegede, Distinguished Colleagues and Friends

It gives me great pleasure to be welcome you once again to the seventh Pan Commonwealth Forum

Let me begin by thanking our hosts the Federal Ministry of Education, and our partners the National Open University of Nigeria for their warm welcome and generous hospitality. Nigeria has a very large heart and knows how to take care of its guests. Prof Tenebe has been most understanding and accommodating throughout the planning process and we have enjoyed a very productive partnership with our NOUN colleagues. Thank you for your impeccable arrangements.

Prof Mba Okoronkwo and each and every member of the Local Organising Committee members have gone out of their way to organise this forum and I thank them most warmly for their contributions as I do my own colleagues Dr Balaji and Dave Wilson. Would some of us be here at all without the personal intervention of Barrister Riki?

The Programme Committee has worked very hard to draw the various sub-themes and strands together as well as to reflect the changes as they evolved almost on a daily basis. Thanks to Anne Gaskell, Prof Israel Adu, Dr Abdurrahman Umar and Ian Pringle for their patience and diligence.

Let me also acknowledge the generous contributions made by our international sponsors and partners: UNICEF; UNESCO; Microsoft Africa; The Open University, UK, the University of London, the Association of Commonwealth Universities and our sister organisation, the Commonwealth Foundation.

As you know COL is twenty five this year so this PCF is a special anniversary event.

Commonwealth Heads of Government agreed to set up the Commonwealth of Learning when they met for their biennial meeting in Vancouver in 1987. 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.

We have activities in all 53 member states that span all regions of the globe, representing the diversity of the world. And yet we share common values of democracy, peace good governance and gender equality. Of the 49 countries represented here today, 40 are members of the Commonwealth.

As you can see the road to Abuja has passed through all regions of the Commonwealth. Starting in Brunei, we came down to South Africa, travelled to New Zealand and then to Jamaica, followed by the UK and India. We are back in Africa in what is a unique opportunity for members of the Commonwealth family to come together and explore how learning can best lead to development.

Our theme for this PCF is Open and Distance Learning for Development: Towards empowerment and Transformation.

COL's work is located within the framework of the MDGs, particularly the six related to poverty alleviation, education, gender equality and health. COL also supports Members States in their efforts to achieve four of the six Education For All Goals relating to access, quality, skills development and gender equality. As the deadline of 2015for achieving these international goals approaches, we find that several Commonwealth countries are still off track to achieve at least one or more of these goals.

Gender equality is one of the priority areas for COL during this Three Year Plan 2012-15. Which aligns well with the African Decade for Women's Equality 2010-2020. COL shares the African Union's focus on a grassroots and bottom up approach to gender equality and women's empowerment.

As you know, our motto is 'Learning for Development'.

What does this mean? 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 educational institutions must impart? Walker, who has worked on the capability approach and how it related to education, 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.

Societies cannot be transformed without the empowerment of their different constituencies. Empowerment is the process of expanding the choices of disempowered communities. According to the World Bank, empowerment means expanding the assets and capabilities of poor people so that they can negotiate with and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. Education and learning is important in the empowerment process. But experience shows that education which promotes critical thinking as well as respect and understanding is needed to empower and transform.

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 formal and non-formal learning. This is an important contribution that COL has made—to extend the potential of ODL beyond academia to the domain of development.

Based on our consultations with stakeholders and NOUN partners, we identified five priority areas as our sub themes which include education for girls and women, skills development, promoting the use of open education resources or OER, , innovation and technology and institutional development. Let me thank our theme leaders most warmly for giving shape and substance to each strand. The work was hard and executed brilliantly. You will see their photos in subsequent slides.

Girls and women's education is a major priority around much of Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia, as there are 31 million girls still out of school. How can ODL contribute to increasing access to quality education and empowering girls and women?

The world has 1.2 billion young people of whom 40% are unemployed. Youth unemployment is a major concern for governments around the Commonwealth and ambitious targets are being set for promoting skills development. How can ODL support this agenda?

Open Education Resources are beginning to capture the imagination of policy makers and practitioners around the Commonwealth. 40% of K-12 educators in the US are using OER to supplement their core content. There are initiatives to develop low-cost OER textbooks and at least 4 Commonwealth countries have developed OER policies.

Some of the headlines under this sub-theme relate to the maturing of MOOCs, the rise of mobile devices and the advent of Learning Analytics.

COL tries to use technology in innovative ways to close the digital divide. The sudden rise of affordable Tablet computers has made it possible for learners even in remote areas to experience the power and advantages of connected learning. Today, there is enough computing power in Tablets to make them function as servers. 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 under $100 and form the core of what we call "Classroom Without Walls'. You will see this in action here.

Institutional development is of major interest in most developing countries. The crisis of quality, effective leadership and good governance are some of the areas of concern. What more needs to be done?

I have tried to give you some headlines relating to the need. So we have a fairly full agenda for the next four days. What role can ODL and ICT play in support of development? What innovations do we need to include the marginalised and to scale up the impact of our interventions? How can learning contribute to empowerment? What are the links between empowerment and transformation? I hope some of these questions will be taken up as we discuss how to support the process of development and social change in the Commonwealth and what we can do collectively to expedite the process.

On that note, let me thank you for your kind attention.