

# *The Commonwealth of Learning: How a Small Agency Achieves Development Impact*

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*Canadian International Development Agency  
Brown-bag lunch session  
Ottawa*

*14 October 2010*

*Sir John Daniel  
Commonwealth of Learning*

## **Announcement**

*In his presentation, Sir John Daniel will discuss the value-added of ODL for development results, how COL works to empower governments, institutions and individuals to develop learning systems themselves and break the cycle of dependence on donors, and the key challenges and trade-offs of its work in this field. He will use concrete programming examples drawing on the organization's various initiatives in open schooling, teacher education, community health and lifelong learning for farmers, among others.*

## **Introduction and Purpose**

It is a pleasure to be back at CIDA and too long since I was here last. I am most grateful to Mia Mouelhi for the invitation and for making it possible to combine this visit with a lunch-time talk to the Commonwealth High Commissioners in Ottawa to which she accompanied me. Although the High Commissioners in London have the main brief to follow Commonwealth affairs, we keep the High Commissioners here informed of COL's dealings with their countries.

I welcome the opportunity to update you on COL. I'm often asked to give descriptive accounts of COL so I welcome Mia's invitation to take the basics for granted and be more reflective. Hence my title: *How a small agency achieves development impact*.

She has suggested that I comment on 'how COL develops its programming using an evidence-based approach, and how the programming adapts to the needs identified by the beneficiaries and involves them in the planning and implementing processes'. Also 'how COL works to empower governments, institutions and individuals to develop learning systems themselves and break the cycle of dependence on donors, and the key challenges and trade-offs of its work in this field'.

She said that you are particularly interested in ‘the value-added of COL in terms of development results and cost-effectiveness’ and in ‘the sustainability of investments beyond COL’s initial engagement’. And finally, the big question of ‘understanding the key challenges and trade-offs associated with open and distance learning, or ODL’.

Finally, she told me that you would be particularly interested in examples from our initiatives in open schooling, teacher education, higher education using ODL and ICTs, lifelong learning for farmers, and community health.

I shall address each element in that agenda as I answer your fundamental question: How does a small agency achieve development impact?

## COL: the basics

I begin by recalling the basics. COL is a Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation with its own Commonwealth-wide board including a permanent governor from Canada.

COL is small with a total of around 40 people. We are based in Vancouver and New Delhi and we are supported for 80% of our budget by voluntary contributions from most Commonwealth governments. Depending on voluntary contributions keeps an organisation honest and concerned about having useful impacts.

What are the other features of COL that ensure it achieves development impacts? I shall list ten. It would be pretentious to call them the Ten Commandments, so consider them simply as Daniel’s Do’s and Don’ts for Development.

## Daniel’s do’s and don’t’s for development

### Focus

The first is focus. For COL this means two things. First we have a focused mission. COL is about technology and learning. We can determine quickly whether a request for help falls within that.

I remember when I was Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO from 2001-2004. One day Director-General Matsuura came to me and said that the International Olympic Committee wanted UNESCO to develop a convention against doping in sport. I told him that I didn’t think that was in our mandate in Education, whereupon he looked at me and said. ‘John, everything is in our mandate’.

In the event we did a rapid and effective job on the convention and years later Dick Pound, the Canadian member of the IOC told me how impressed he had been by UNESCO’s performance. However, I consider that experience the exception that proves the rule. In general, trying to be all things to all people is not a recipe for impact.

Second, we are obsessive about country focus and liaise closely with our focal points in each country for planning and reporting. At meetings of Education and Foreign Ministers we report individually by country and we have an action plan for each country that is updated regularly during the triennium. This is a direct response to your question about how ‘our programming adapts to the needs identified by the beneficiaries and involves them in the planning and implementing processes’.

This year we shall begin developing our plan for 2012-2015 and one feature of the process will be regional meetings of our focal points like this one.

## Important objectives

My second guideline is to have important objectives. We don't just want impact: we want impact on important problems. So at the macro level we define development as an amalgam of the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All and Commonwealth values.

Out of all that we have chosen, with advice from our focal points, eight development challenges related to learning that seem particularly important.

Four are challenges of expanding and improving formal education. Open schooling, to address the secondary surge of hundreds of millions of children; teacher education to contribute to the training of 10 million new teachers; higher education to raise quality, and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, a programme initiated by the 32 small states ten years ago to help them jump the digital divide.

The four others are aimed at informal learning. They are better means of skills development, particularly for the informal economy; learning for farmer, one successful example of that to which I shall return. We help in applying community media for improving health, and finally in an initiative that spans both formal and informal, we try to respond to the vast demand for help with eLearning.

## Not a donor

The next element in my list is that we are not a donor. We are pleased to receive funds from CIDA, DFID and the New Zealand Aid Programme, but we do not pass those funds on as cash. Our aim is to help people help themselves, to make local systems work better and to use local resources. We used to donate equipment occasionally but we don't do that any more because it creates dependency.

So in the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme for example, the funds come from local banks and these women paid for their cell phones, although the mobile company gives them free calls to other members of their learning group.

## One person – one initiative

Principle four, which is a new development in our 2009-2012 Plan, is to have a one-to-one correspondence between COL's eight Education Specialists and the eight initiatives.

This is motivating for my professional colleagues; it makes accountability clear and, contrary to what you might think, it has increased teamwork. When people are clear about their own responsibility and authority they are much more ready to ask others for help, for example when someone else is visiting a country, than if they are competing to get credit for achievements.

## Systems

Next and these are only roughly in priority order, are effective governance, management and other systems. COL runs itself transparently and efficiently. I shall not go into all the systems but just note a few features.

Our international staff serve on rotation. They have three-year contracts and cannot stay longer than nine years. This allows us to adapt our staff complement to the evolving programme. It runs the risk of loss of institutional memory but we address that through sophisticated knowledge management systems.

We apply results-based management effectively by adapting it to COL's needs and have produced our own guide for this purpose.

To put added emphasis on the importance of impact we are conducting one tracer study on impact for each of our programme initiatives. Similarly, as part of our gender mainstreaming policy, there will be one specifically gender focused project within each initiative, even where, as in the Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative, the large majority of the people involved are women.

This is linked to a performance management system which means that apart from occasional inflationary increases formally approved by the board, all salary increases are performance related.

These and other systems give assurance about 'the value-added of COL in terms of development results and cost-effectiveness'.

## Policy

Turning now to principles that guide COL's work in the field, I start with policy. More than most areas of human endeavour the introduction of educational technology is bedevilled by adhocery as ministers yield to the siren songs of equipment vendors and seek the glamour of being associated with information technology. Yet technology enhanced learning systems need long term commitments, so COL insists on helping with policy making, at national or institutional level depending on the issue, before getting into the nitty gritty of projects.

Another example would be the importance of having a national policy on community radio. India was restrictive about this for years but recently saw the light and wants 4,000 community radio stations established. COL's CEMCA unit in New Delhi is one of the prime facilitators of this development.

## Models

Next, and of huge importance for empowering governments, institutions and individuals to develop learning systems themselves and break the cycle of dependence on donors, come models. COL seeks to achieve impact at scale by implementing successful initiatives in many countries. To do this it is absolutely important to know why and how a project works, in other words to understand the model on which it is based. COL operates on models in all its initiatives, the best known being the model for rural development we call lifelong learning for farmers.

This model has been developed and refined by Dr Balasubramanian and his predecessors over many years. As a result we now know how to move a community from microfinance to commercial banking. We know what role media and ICTs play, so it becomes easy to innovate successfully, as in this project with 6,000 women who learn to rear healthier and more valuable goats thanks to a daily series of audio

messages received on their mobile phones. This system, I am proud to say, results from collaboration between COL and the University of British Columbia, so this is Canadian technology.

## Partnerships

Naturally, you would expect to see partnerships on my list of guiding principles. We consider every Commonwealth country to be a partner, but we also have important partnerships with institutions and funding bodies. For example, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has a major commitment to promote the development and use of Open Educational Resources, which are very important for COL. We have a long-term relationship with them which has helped fund the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and also a six-country collaboration to develop the senior secondary curriculum as OERS.

I am sure you are all well-versed in the challenges of managing partnerships and I shall not dwell on them. Suffice it to say that they are vital to our impact and we nurture them carefully.

## Build capacity

Much of our work is capacity building and we do much soul-searching about how to make it stick. For example, both the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and the Secondary Curriculum programmes that I just mentioned are as much about creating cadres of capable people as about producing learning materials.

This is key to ‘the sustainability of investments beyond COL’s initial engagement’ and we build capacity in sustainable ways by being demanding about who we engage in capacity building with, how the training is carried out, and what the participants do with it when they get home.

## Location

The last of my ten principles, and here I am not being facetious, is location. Sometimes I entitle my talks on COL *Small, Successful and not in London*. Having worked at UNESCO in Paris and spent considerable time at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London I can assert that such attractive capital cities are not the best places to get development work done. Vancouver suits COL very nicely. We only attract those visitors who really want to see us and Vancouver is a very liveable city. It may be rather far from some parts of the Commonwealth, but that simply makes us plan our travel effectively.

I hope that with these ten points I have given you an idea of how COL achieves development impact.

## ODL Trade-offs

Let me end by addressing what Mia called the big question of ‘understanding the key challenges and trade-offs associated with open and distance learning, or ODL’.

One key challenge is to help policy makers understand that if we want to address the major tasks of educational development there is no alternative to approaches based on ODL. I spoke about this in a talk in St. John’s, Newfoundland, yesterday.

Educational civil servants are conservative folk but they can see that they will not be able to get 400 million more 12-17 years olds into secondary education by expanding conventional schooling, and the same applies to training 10 million teachers.

So we are getting more and more requests from Member States for help with establishing or improving open schooling and the Commonwealth Open Schooling Association, which we helped to create last year is a good community of practice.

The second challenge is to help people design ODL systems that are fit for purpose. Ministers of Education are easy prey for equipment vendors and hype merchants who tell them that eLearning can solve all their problems.

The real task is the hard slog of setting up effective course creation, administrative and logistics systems for ODL that can then evolve with the technology. For example, the Indian Open School, NIOS reaches its million plus pupils with fairly traditional media, especially print. Yet nearly half the pupils register online and there is a very sophisticated IT-driven examination system.

## Conclusion: breaking out of the Iron Triangle

In all this the key criterion is quality at scale, because only then do the costs go down. I can best summarise this by ending with my signature Iron Triangle. What Ministers of Education want to do is to take this iron triangle of access, quality and cost and stretch it like this to give more access, higher quality and lower cost. But you can't do this with classroom teaching because when you make one element better you make the others worse. Technology is what allows us to break out of the iron triangle and achieve these three objectives simultaneously.

It has done this in most other areas of life over the last hundred years and COL is there to help effect the same transformation in education, training and learning.