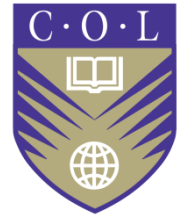


# *Knowledge for Development in the Information Age*

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*Notes for the Preliminary Consultation on Global Knowledge 97: Knowledge for Development in the Information Age, Montreal, PQ, April 7, 1997  
by Lewis Perinbam, Senior Advisor (External Relations)*

## Transcript

The organisers of this Consultation, the World Bank and the Government of Canada, have stated that its main purposes are:

- to understand the role of knowledge and information in economic and social development, and the challenges and opportunities posed for developing countries by the information revolution;
- to share strategies, experiences and tools in harnessing knowledge for development;
- to build new partnerships that will empower the poor with information and knowledge and build the knowledge resources of developing countries.

While each of these objectives is important in its own right the second and third are particularly significant. This is because the context and the infrastructure for using the new and developing technologies are as vital- and perhaps even more so - than the technologies themselves. The tendency to transplant technologies without regard for cultural, social and other considerations or to use them simply because we possess them must be resisted. Useful as the technologies are their value is in doing the job that needs to be done.

The development era has passed through several phases in the past four decades. In the early post-war years the focus was financing physical infrastructure - to enable developing countries to build much needed roads, railways, power plants and ports. The World Bank and major bilateral aid donors concentrated in providing capital assistance for these purposes.

The first major shift in the direction of human resource development came about 1965 when the World Bank decided to lend for educational and agricultural projects which, until then, it was unwilling to do. For this purpose it entered into "cooperative agreements" with UNESCO and FAO to gain access to their knowledge and experience in the educational and agricultural sectors. In turn UNESCO and FAO acquired a strong financial partner.

The next change in the human resource development picture occurred in 1969 when Canada, through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) became the first donor agency to initiate a

programme to tap the knowledge, experience and expertise that reside in the non governmental sector as well as to encourage the participation of Canadians in international development. Since NGOs concentrated their efforts largely on meeting human needs and in sectors such as education, health and rural development they were pioneers and leaders in human resource development. Several other governments followed CIDA's lead and eventually the Bank, the UNDP and other multilateral agencies recognised the potential for cooperation with NGOs to advance human resource development.

Today, distance learning and new technologies represent a further step in the development era. They have given us new tools for human resource development - namely the open learning institutions in the North and in the South. They have been instrumental in bringing access to knowledge to millions who were unreached or unreachable by conventional education systems.

For the first time in human history we possess the means to reach almost every community on our planet in a single moment. The technological revolution is affecting many facets of economic and social relations. The London Economist has referred to the "death of distance" as the greatest force changing and shaping our society. For instance, our programming achievements in non-formal education through a combination of talent, human skills, knowledge and broadcasting technology include:

1. Honduras: Within a year, after a concerted educational radio campaign, an almost illiterate population was able to choose and to use the skills to reduce the risks of diarrhoea dehydration by about 40% through the use of an oral rehydration solution - thus saving countless lives.
2. India: A 600% increase in condom sales was achieved within a year through a television-driven consumer education programme. In addition to reducing the birth rate its value in combating AIDS is significant.
3. Turkey: A mass campaign increased substantially the catchment for child immunisation programmes.

In formal education, while the capacity to reach millions through interactive media is not yet here, the efforts of the Open Schools of India and New Zealand and the Open Universities of Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, the U.K. and Canada in reaching hundreds of thousands of students demonstrate what is possible. Recent reports by the World Bank, OECD and UNESCO predict that in the next decade distance education will be the most important mode of delivery for learning throughout life and for life.

The growing demands for more education, the lack of financial and, more importantly human resources, the erosion of quality in education systems, and the demands of the knowledge era for skills are propelling political leaders to crusade for educational reform - including making access to learning an easier process. Those with responsibility for developing skills and knowledge to meet national needs - in the arts, science, business, agriculture, technologies and administration - are resorting to new and old technologies for this purpose in both developed and developing countries. Increasingly, educational institutions have taken education to their students regardless of the barriers of space, time, prior knowledge, gender and affordability. They are active in sectors as diverse as literacy programmes (Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan) to doctorates in education (The U.K. Open University). Some have only a few thousand students (University of Papua New Guinea) compared to others with as many as 250,000 students (Indira Gandhi National Open University in India). Some have been in distance

education for about 50 years (University of South Africa) and others are brand new such as the University of Sarawak in Malaysia. Their offerings in distance education include courses from family medicine to philosophy, from computer science to art history, from communications technology to English language and literature.

Some achievements are impressive. For instance, the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong, which celebrated its fifth anniversary in June 1994, has provided access to learning for its citizens on the basis of a user-pay system. It also reflects a unique government/consumer partnership.

Communications and information technologies that are coming into vogue possess enormous potential in educational delivery. Technology, however, does not teach. It enables the delivery of teaching and shifts the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learner. This requires governments and agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP and the Regional Banks to bring distance learning into their sights and to give it a higher priority and to create an environment in which it can be used effectively. They can do so in the following ways:

- creating a policy framework for open and distance learning to become an integral part of a nation's education base (e.g. India, South Africa);
- encouraging minimal standards of good practice for those involved in the delivery of open and distance learning (e.g. Hong Kong);
- creating pathways for the free and easy movement of credits and credentials across the education system (e.g. Canada); and
- requiring international donor and lending agencies and recipient governments to include open and distance learning in the educational planning framework of a country.

The World Bank may wish to consider "cooperative relationships" with appropriate agencies and institutions to advance this process. Distance teaching institutions and agencies can play a useful role for several reasons:

1. They recognise the need for informed educational rather than purely technical decisions in guiding national and regional strategies;
2. Because culture, language and traditions play a critical role in education they assist those who use technologies to adapt them to local conditions;
3. They have acquired experience in forging the kind of partnerships required;
4. They have developed strong and effective training programmes for staff at all levels that are vital in this concept.

Canada has much to offer to agencies like the World Bank and CIDA. However, one of the major challenges is to persuade the educational establishment that distance learning is not a threat but an opportunity. Universities must be more hospitable than they have been to integrate distance learning into their systems. They should recognise that it can help widen access to education and improve its quality. It

will not only strengthen their capabilities, add new dimensions to their programmes but it will also enhance their place in the community by making them more responsive to its needs.

Distance educators also have a role to play. They have to be more persuasive and forceful in marketing their capabilities and to connect with other sectors. They must inspire confidence in their worth and become energetic missionaries in bringing distance learning to the forefront of a knowledge-driven era.

There is another reason why the conference that the World Bank and the Government of Canada are convening in Toronto on June 22-25, 1997 is significant. Distance learning and new technologies are bringing about the levelling of educational opportunity. It offers an unprecedented opportunity to break out of the aid era of donors and recipients and to build a new millennium that forges cooperation between equals working towards common goals that bring mutual benefits.

The world has changed dramatically in the past decade. The so-called developing countries account for nearly 50% of world GDP. China and India are emerging as major players in the world market place and Latin America is following suit. They can no longer be regarded as aid recipients; they have taken their place as equals in the new global economy.

By harnessing distance learning and new communications technologies Canada can play a pivotal role in transforming a world that has been divided between the educationally rich and poor into a new human community founded on partnership between equals. It will be a transformation without parallel in human history that will advance humankind to new levels of achievement.