THE COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

LEARNING FOR DEVELOPMENT
The MDGs

World leaders, meeting at the United Nations in 2000, set eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that aim to transform the condition of humankind in the 21st century. These Goals now guide the policies of governments and the priorities of development agencies.

Achieving the MDGs will require a massive expansion of human learning. Traditional methods of education and training cannot address the scope and scale of the task. Technology has already revolutionised other areas of human life; the world must now harness it to learning and teaching.
Commonwealth of Learning (COL)  www.col.org

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental agency created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies. COL operates on the premise that knowledge is the key to individual freedom and to cultural, social and economic development.

COL helps governments to develop policies that make innovation sustainable and to build systems or applications that expand learning. It works in partnership with other international and bilateral organisations working on the MDGs including: the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), New Zealand’s Agency for International Development (NZAID), UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and the World Health Organization.

COL is a small agency. It achieves high impact through effective networking, its focus on technology and its special emphasis on the proven effectiveness of open and distance learning (ODL).
Learning for Development

COL’s mission is to help governments and institutions expand the scope, scale and quality of learning by using new approaches and technologies, especially those related to ODL.

The use of ODL has expanded rapidly in recent years. Today, thanks to improved connectivity and new developments in information and communication technology (ICT) such as social software and open educational resources (OER), ODL applications continue to accelerate.

COL’s focus on Learning for Development is based on a vision that reaches beyond formal education to embrace areas of learning that are vital for better livelihoods, greater prosperity and a safer environment. Understanding development as the process of increasing the freedoms that people can enjoy, COL pursues this vision operationally with the framework of the MDGs, the campaign for Education for All and Commonwealth values.

COL’s Contribution to the MDGs

To maximise its impact, COL applies its expertise in ODL to tackle some of the most critical obstacles to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

For example:

- Fighting hunger and improving prosperity by engaging farmers and other rural people in livelihood-related learning.
- Supporting innovative approaches to expanding teacher training, a major bottleneck to achieving primary education and gender parity.
- Improving the health of mothers and children and arresting the spread of disease through the use of participatory community media.

COL addresses these barriers to development by leveraging its expertise in a multiplicity of partnerships and networks.
Target for 2015: Halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those who suffer from hunger

COL targets poverty and hunger through a variety of initiatives:

- Learning for Farming
- Community Media
- Flexible Skills Development

**Learning for Farming**

COL’s Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme helps rural communities engage in appropriate technology-based open and distance education to improve their livelihoods. The programme is a response to a critical need: the wealth of information resulting from agricultural research and development often fails to travel the last mile to the villages of the developing world where it is most needed. While governments face challenges in funding adequate agricultural extension, globalisation is creating increasing competition for poor rural farmers.

Lifelong Learning for Farmers addresses these issues by enabling vulnerable rural women and their families to embrace learning. The programme brings together four key partners: farmers, learning institutions, mobile phone and ICT companies, and banks. As farmers gain relevant knowledge from learning institutions via mobile phones and ICT kiosks, banks provide loans to them with greater assurance.

Introduced in southern India in 2004, Lifelong Learning for Farmers has been adapted and introduced in Jamaica, Kenya, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Uganda.
COL also works in partnership with many national agricultural research and extension systems in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and collaborates with international organisations such as the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the FAO, the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) and the International Society for Horticultural Sciences (ISHS).

Community Media

COL helps communities collaborate in using media to create relevant learning programmes aimed at alleviating hunger and poverty. These participatory media initiatives bring together community media (most commonly community radio stations), community groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and health authorities to create learning programmes that meet local needs.

In Kingston, Jamaica, COL has partnered with local groups and community radio station ROOTS FM to create radio programmes that raise awareness about issues such as parenting, substance abuse and disaster preparedness.

COL has also supported a radio scriptwriting course and competition for radio stations and agriculture groups in Africa. The 15 award-winning scripts – covering subjects from improving storage of potatoes and hanging garden technology to innovations in composting – have been provided to 350 African media organisations to encourage further broadcasting and sharing of valuable information.
Flexible Skills Development

COL is helping technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions in Africa expand flexible and blended delivery approaches. By increasing access to quality skills development for young people and adults, COL’s Flexible Skills Development (FSD) programme is contributing to the alleviation of poverty. This programme actively targets course development for people working in the informal economy.

Through online training, workshops and an online Community Learning Network, COL is helping 11 key TVET institutions in six countries in strengthening capacity to develop new curriculum content to realise the benefits of educational media and technology. In addition, these institutions are developing new flexible courses to provide skills training for previously disadvantaged learners.

COL has worked with the Pacific Association of Technical/Vocational Education and Training to develop training courses in basic trades to help meet the skills needs of small island states in the Pacific. The COL courses in Small Business, Small Engine Maintenance, Tourism as a Business, Working with Timber and Working with Concrete are broadening access to skills acquisition in basic trades. This is supported by “Literacy for Basic Trades”, a course developed by COL and partners in the Pacific to assist students with varying levels of literacy.
Of all the Millennium Development Goals, this is the most fundamental. Having most people complete a good quality basic education is the platform for sustained and sustainable development. COL is working with governments to maximise the contribution that ODL can make to basic education. COL supports the worldwide campaign to achieve Education for All (EFA) and its core campaign for Universal Primary Education (UPE) at several levels, including:

- Open Schooling
- Teacher Education
- Sharing Content

**Open Schooling**

COL spearheaded the creation of the Commonwealth Open School Association (COMOSA), an international group of ODL institutions working together to promote innovative, high quality and cost-effective open schooling.

COMOSA members are collaborating in several areas of research related to open schooling including success factors in online learning, open schooling potential in the Pacific and the gender-sensitivity of open schools.
Teacher Education

Attaining Universal Primary Education depends in large part on the availability of an adequate supply of well trained teachers and the provision of continuing professional development for teachers. COL is applying ODL to help developing countries build the capacity of their teacher training systems. Major teacher education initiatives include:

- **TESSA**: Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) is a consortium of 18 organisations including COL that are collaborating to develop extensive multilingual OER for teacher training. An estimated half a million teachers across Africa are using these materials to improve their skills and knowledge.

- **Child-Friendly Schools**: Developed by UNICEF as a response to growing global concerns about the poor quality of basic education, the Child-Friendly Schools model promotes a rights-based concept of quality that goes beyond good teaching methods and learning outcomes to include health, safety, adequate school facilities and supplies.

COL has made a significant contribution to the development of resources for open schools. A number of publications, including the *Quality Assurance Toolkit for Open Schools*, a manual for tutors, a resource guide for managers and *Perspectives on Distance Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century*, are freely available on COL’s website.

COL sponsors training initiatives that build capacity in open schooling. Workshops on subjects such as learner support, quality assurance, multimedia content creation, integration of technology, financing, monitoring and evaluation and gender sensitive strategies for open schools are regularly held across the Commonwealth. COL has also funded studies into the establishment of open schools, most recently in Cameroon, Ghana, Tanzania, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia.
COL is working in partnership with UNICEF to mainstream the Child-Friendly Schools models and approaches into pre-service and in-service teacher education curricula in eight countries. This includes strengthening the roles of Teacher Resource Centres to promote Child-Friendly Schools.

• **Improving teacher training:** COL helps build capacity by providing training in learner support, school management and instructional design for teacher training institutions. For instance, COL is helping Nigeria’s National Teachers’ Institute improve learner support provided to in-service teachers who are upgrading their qualification. COL has trained 78 Master Teachers who are now training 6,000 course tutors in the unique challenges and opportunities of tutoring in ODL.

• **Quality Assurance:** COL has developed a *Quality Assurance Toolkit for Teacher Education* that can be used for both internal and external assessment. Other initiatives aimed at improving teacher quality include hosting a consultation on draft teaching performance and academic standards in the Caribbean and developing a quality assurance model for higher education institutions, the COL Review and Improvement Model (COL RIM).

• **Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All:** COL President Sir John Daniel’s latest book explores the challenges created by the universal primary education campaign. It examines the potential of open schooling and scale responses to the challenge of teacher training.
Sharing Content

ODL allows learning materials to be shared across borders. COL supports the sharing of content on an open source basis and has been a leader in promoting open educational resources (OER): teaching and learning materials that may be freely re-used.

- **Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC):** COL led the establishment of this partnership of 32 small states of the Commonwealth who are collaborating to expand access to tertiary education. Participating countries are developing tertiary-level course materials that are freely available as OER for download, adaptation and re-use.

- **OER for Open Schools:** Led by COL, with support from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, **OER for Open Schools** brought together educators from six developing countries to create OER for 20 senior secondary courses. The self-learning materials are available in both print and online formats, and are freely available for download, adaptation and use. In addition to creating valuable resources that will help expand access to quality education, **OER for Open Schools** provided skills development for 100 Master Teachers who learned how to develop OER and are sharing this knowledge with colleagues.

- **Taking OER Beyond the OER Community:** This COL/UNESCO joint initiative promotes the wider use of OER by expanding understanding of OER by educational decision makers and quality assurance experts through capacity building workshops in all regions of the Commonwealth, online discussion forums and new OER publications.

- **Learning4Content:** COL initiated Learning4Content, a groundbreaking global training effort that provides free training in “wiki” skills. More than 4,000 educators have taken part in workshops that teach online content creation skills. In return for the free training, participants contribute one OER to a library of free learning materials.
Targets for 2005 and 2015: Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015

COL looks beyond the arithmetical target of gender parity (equal numbers of males and females in school) to the more challenging goal of gender equality (equality of outcomes). COL’s gender work includes:

- Gender Resources
- Women and ICT
- Gender Research

Gender equality is a cross-cutting theme that is prevalent in all of COL’s initiatives. The advancement of gender equality and women’s empowerment are central to COL’s agenda of learning for development.

ODL can be especially helpful for women and girls to access educational opportunities while they also fulfil other responsibilities. Through its work in areas such as open schooling, learning for farming and community media, COL harnesses the potential of ODL to help promote gender equality. A number of other initiatives are focused specifically on promoting gender equality.
Gender Resources

COL’s Gender micro-site provides a one-stop, comprehensive platform to access print and electronic resources on gender and ODL with a special emphasis on information and communication technology (ICT). The main purpose of this gender micro-site is to raise awareness and to provide tools to ODL policymakers and practitioners to help them address gender concerns in their areas of competence.

COL’s website offers a wealth of information related to gender. Online resources include:

- **The Gender Management System (GMS) Toolkit: An Integrated Resource for Implementing the Gender Management System Series**: a print resource developed by COL with the Commonwealth Secretariat to help Commonwealth governments to mainstream gender issues into their decision-making and to support the work of those responsible for gender mainstreaming.

- **Identifying Barriers to ICTs in Education based on Gender Differences**: reports from regional experts meetings convened by COL.

- **Producing Gender-Sensitive Materials for ODL**: a publication in COL’s Knowledge Series.

- **Boys’ Underachievement in Education: an exploration in selected Commonwealth countries**: a book that reviews research about this gender issue and suggests how ODL can help alleviate it.
Women and ICT

As the only intergovernmental agency specialising in the application of technology to education, COL has a special interest in gender equality in the use of ICT. It has convened regional meetings in various Commonwealth countries to examine the barriers that women face in accessing and using technology. COL also sponsored training workshops that focus specifically on building ICT skills among female academics. This includes workshops on ICT skills for open school administrators and for female academic staff at Tanzania’s Institute of Adult Education.

Gender Research

COL’s regional agency, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA), collaborated with Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India to conduct research into gender and ODL. The study, which explored the impact of learning through distance mode and how support structures address the specific needs of women and gender perspectives in content, won the “Best Research Paper” award at IGNOU’s March 2010 convocation and was published in The Journal of Open and Distance Learning.

Research being conducted by COMOSA members about gender issues in open schools will also contribute to understanding how to foster the full participation of women and girls in education and development.
COL works in partnership with community organisations, district health offices, hospitals and governments to increase the reach and impact of health information that can save lives:

- Healthy Communities initiatives
- Community Radio in India

**THE HEALTH GOALS**

Three of the MDGs Target Health

1. **4) REDUCE CHILD MORTALITY**
   Target for 2015: Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate for children under five

2. **5) IMPROVE MATERNAL HEALTH**
   Target for 2015: Reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth

3. **6) COMBAT HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES**
   Target for 2015: halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

COL HAS WORKED ON HEALTH IN:
- Bangladesh
- Belize
- Cameroon
- India
- Jamaica
- Kenya
- Malawi
- Namibia
- Papua New Guinea
- Solomon Islands
- South Africa
- Sri Lanka
- Tanzania
Healthy Communities

COL’s Healthy Communities initiative brings together groups working at the local level – media, health agencies, NGOs and community groups – to address health and development challenges through participatory learning programmes. While programmes vary according to local needs, COL’s approach remains consistent:

• Bring together local partners: most often community groups identify health information needs, health agencies provide content and community radio stations broadcast the learning programmes.

• Build capacity: this usually involves radio production skills, which expands the pool of community members who are actively engaged in the programme.

• Provide ongoing support: as programmes mature and partners change, COL will help community learning programmes adjust and continue to grow.

Recent initiatives span the Commonwealth, responding to local health needs.

In Malawi, COL has supported the development of a weekly radio programme about maternal and child health to an audience of 80,000 women. A network of 200 community groups facilitates learning through discussion about the radio broadcasts.

In Belize, community groups are collaborating to produce radio programmes that address community health issues such as diabetes, hypertension and HIV/AIDS.

A community learning initiative in Cameroon about mother and child health care combines radio broadcasts with face-to-face learning sessions.

In Isabel Province, Solomon Islands, media groups and health workers have collaborated to create learning programmes covering subjects such as diabetes, sanitation and youth reproduction health.
Community Radio in India

COL’s regional agency, CEMCA, has been working with the Government of India to support the rapid expansion of community radio in the country. CEMCA has hosted consultation workshops – attracting more than 2,000 organisations – to increase awareness about community radio and the license application process. The number of community radio stations has expanded from just one in 2004 to more than 110 in 2011. CEMCA recently established the Community Radio Facilitation Centre to provide support to community radio station applicants and operators. The Centre provides advice, training and resource materials to community radio stations free of charge.

CEMCA also spearheaded Science for Women, a community radio programme that provides illiterate women in resource-poor settings with access to learning about important health issues. Women create radio programmes about health and nutrition in partnership with universities. The daily 15-30 minute programme is broadcast on community radio stations, with a reach estimated at 12,000 women (and inevitably many men as well) across India.
Education for Sustainable Development

Environmental sustainability is both a global and a local concern. COL is addressing it at the local level by helping institutions to improve the quality and impact of environmental education. COL maintains a library of resources and documents on the environment to support educators and practitioners and is helping institutions to develop specialised courses in ODL format.

In India, for example, the Centre for Environment Education (CEE), in partnership with COL, developed Green Teacher, a one-year distance education diploma course in environmental education. It is now being piloted with 50 trainees. Institutions in South Asia and Africa are showing interest in adapting this course for their use. Some open universities and teacher education institutions in India have decided to develop a consortium for working together in the use of ODL for education and training needs in sustainable development.

Likewise, COL has partnered with the Indian Institute of Science to develop five environmental engineering modules that can be taught through ODL. The courses cover issues targeted by this MDG, such as air pollution, municipal water and waste water management, environmental management, ground water and soil pollution and solid waste management. The courses provide continuing professional development for practicing engineering professionals in India and developing Commonwealth countries.

COL’s Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme and community learning programmes provide relevant information that helps individuals protect environmental resources and ensure environmental sustainability.

Targets:

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources
- By 2015, reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water
- By 2020 achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers
DEVELOP A GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

The targets for this goal are wide-ranging and include:

- a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction
- the special needs of landlocked and small island developing states
- developing decent and productive work for youth
- making available the benefits of new technologies – especially information and communications technologies

COL is working in each of these areas:

- Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)
- Building Capacity in eLearning
- Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning
- Powerful Partnerships

THE SMALL STATES OF THE COMMONWEALTH ARE:

Antigua & Barbuda
The Bahamas
Barbados
Belize
Botswana
Brunei Darussalam
Cyprus
Dominica
Fiji Islands
The Gambia,
Grenada
Guyana
Jamaica
Kiribati
Lesotho
Maldives
Malta
Mauritius
Namibia
Nauru
Papua New Guinea
Samoa
Seychelles
Solomon Islands
St. Kitts & Nevis
St. Lucia
St. Vincent & the Grenadines
Swaziland
Tonga
Trinidad & Tobago
Tuvalu
Vanuatu
Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)  www.vussc.org

VUSSC is a partnership of 32 small states of the Commonwealth dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education. Launched by COL in response to a request from Commonwealth Education Ministers, VUSSC has provided skills development for educators. After taking part in intensive content development workshops (or “boot camps”), the educators collaborate to create course materials that are freely available on the VUSSC website for download, adaptation and use. Among the courses that have been developed by VUSSC is a Business and Entrepreneurship programme that includes certificate, diploma and degree levels.

VUSSC is led by a Management Committee with representatives from small states in all regions of the Commonwealth. The VUSSC learning portal offers free online materials, tips for online learning and the Moodle Learning Management System for producing, offering and managing online courses. VUSSC’s Transnational Qualifications Framework is a system of accreditation for VUSSC courses that facilitates the movement of courses and learners among states.

Building Capacity in eLearning

COL helps countries and institutions to understand eLearning and implement it using technologies that are practical, user-friendly and compatible with available and existing equipment. In addition its work supporting the development and sharing of OER, COL is building capacity in eLearning. Initiatives include expanding training in eTutoring, developing low-cost technology options for the developing Commonwealth and building communities of practice.
Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning

COL’s biennial Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF) is one of the world’s leading conferences on learning and global development. It brings together people representing educational institutions, governments and development agencies to explore issues related to ODL and development. More than 600 delegates from 70 countries attended PCF6, held in Kerala, India in 2010. COL’s Excellence in Distance Education Awards, honouring individual and institutions contributions to ODL, are presented at PCF.

Powerful Partnerships

Partnerships are at the heart of COL’s work – both local, operational relationships and international alliances with development agencies and groups such as The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Through numerous Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), COL extends its expertise in ODL. MOUs have been signed with the Commonwealth Secretariat, Indira Gandhi National Open University and UNESCO.

COL’s work is supported by networks of advisors across the Commonwealth:

- **Focal Points:** individuals nominated by the Minister of Education in each country to act as COL’s primary contact.
- **Honorary Advisors:** eminent open and distance learning (ODL) professionals from across the Commonwealth are a valuable resource for consultations about COL’s future plans and for Member States seeking advice on ODL.
- **UNESCO-COL Chairs:** distinguished academics who serve in an honorary capacity, complementing the political and administrative role of the Focal Points and Honorary Advisors.
Conclusion

Learning for Development is the theme of COL’s work. In line with the thinking of development economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, COL understands development as freedom. Increasing freedom is the measure of development, and free people are the drivers of development.

As a world leader in the field of knowledge management, COL has a special mission to help people access and use knowledge that can help them. The achievement of the Millennium Development Goals does not depend on knowledge and learning alone. Political decisions, for example to make trading arrangements more equitable for developing countries, also have a vital role.

However, ready access to usable knowledge can enable people in developing countries, from farmers to academics, to take rapid advantage of favourable changes.

Development depends on the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge by everyone. COL believes that technology can greatly facilitate these processes. The techniques of ODL give farmers the know-how to improve their livelihoods. Community learning programmes provide women the knowledge to raise a healthy family. Open schooling increases access to education. Distance learning enables teachers to upgrade their skills. OER expand availability of quality learning materials.

COL is an effective partner in combining knowledge and technology to advance development.
COL Knowledge Resources

COL’s extensive resources, freely available through its website, include:

- **Connections** newsletter: providing news, commentary and insight about COL’s work and the broader field of ODL and development (www.col.org/connections)
- Blog: timely news and comment from COL (www.col.org/blog)
- Publications: research, books, toolkits and other publications commissioned by COL (www.col.org/publications)
- Knowledge Finder: an index of documents about ODL and international development from quality-assessed external sources (www.col.org/kf)
- Country information: this online database provides access to information related to ODL from all Commonwealth countries (www.col.org/CountryInfo)
- Videos: reports from events and insight into COL’s work (www.col.org/videos)
- Course materials, gender microsite, quality assurance microsite, speeches and other resources (www.col.org/resources)
- Governance and financial information: including Board minutes, financial statements and the President’s quarterly reports to the Board (www.col.org/GovInfo)