

Assessment of Lifelong Learning for farmers: Impact on rural poverty eradication in Commonwealth Countries

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Abstract:-

Commonwealth of learning's lifelong learning for farmers is a partnership programme designed to bring together farmers, learning institutions, banks and information and communication technology providers to facilitate learning for development in the rural areas. The programme is in response to the critical need for information resulting from agricultural research and development which often fail to reach the target farmers in rural areas in the developing world where it is most needed. This is as a result of the ineffectiveness of extension workers to serve farmers due to the high extension: farmer ratio; and the large scale expansion of learning required to achieve the millennium development goals which the conventional face-to-face learning cannot address. The programme empowered the vulnerable farmers and their families to gain knowledge on skill development, increase their productivity, food security and liberate agricultural communities from socio-economic constraints. The project started in India in 2004 and the success of the initiative led to its introduction in other common wealth countries. Lifelong learning for farmers has resulted in improvement of quality of their produce and equally improved their incomes leading to significant improvement in livelihoods of the rural poor and hence reduces poverty. This makes it an inevitable tool for rural community development and a means for the achievement of Millennium Development Goals of eradicating hunger and poverty.

Keywords: - Learning, Farmers, Skill development, Poverty reduction and ICT

INTRODUCTION

The birth of lifelong learning for farmers (L3F) by Commonwealth of Learning (COL) came as aftermath of online discussion and meetings of the second Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in Durban, South Africa, where researches into open and distance learning (ODL) as well as information and communication technology (ICT) for agricultural development in low income countries came into focus. These culminated in the proposal of lifelong learning for farmers project to COL with a mandate to collaborate with National Agricultural Research and Extension Systems (NARES), Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and other international organisation with the aim of solving the long-term challenges facing small holders in low income countries (Colin *et al.*, 2004). This initiative by Commonwealth of Learning was also in response to a critical need of information resulting from agricultural research and development to reach farmers at the right time and place (www.col.org/l3f); to achieve the large scale expansion of learning required by Millenium Development Goals and; the inability of the conventional face-to-face institutions to address the massive learning needs that exist in developing world (COL in Action, 2012) and the high extension to farmers ratio in most commonwealth countries which are critical issues. The initiative target groups in the developing countries are:

- i. small holders in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and small Island states (ultimate beneficiaries);
- ii. extension workers and others who act as learning facilitators within small holders communities;
- iii. managers and staff in agricultural research and development agencies whose policies, priorities, resource provision and other actions can support open and distance learning and information and communication technology in extension in those three regions.

Following the acceptance of the project by Commonwealth of Learning and other stakeholders, lifelong learning for farmers project was initiated as a pilot scheme based on three years (2004-2006) action plan for initiatives in food security, environmental sustainability and poverty reduction.

The conceptual, formative and planning stage of lifelong learning for farmers took two years (2002-2004) which led to a framework for its full implementation in 2004. This demonstrates Commonwealth of Learning's ability to partner with communities and organizations to make effective use of information and communication technology to facilitate learning for development (www.col.org/l3f). The purpose of lifelong learning for farmers project according to Balasubramanian *et al.*, (2006) and www.col.org/l3f, is to empower the vulnerable women and their families and liberate agricultural communities from socio-economic constraints by facilitating the communities to create socially and financially sustainable self directed lifelong learning systems that will enable them gain new knowledge and skills for increasing their farm productivity and for accessing local and global markets more equitably. Commonwealth of Learning plays the role of technical coordination, facilitating, funding and partnering with stakeholders to achieve the objective of lifelong learning for farmers. The partnership bring together Commonwealth of Learning and its stakeholders: farmers, researchers, educational institutions, information and communication technology providers and banks, who developed a framework for reaching millions of small farmers and marginalized section of the rural community in Africa, South Asia and other small states (Balasubramanian *et al.*, 2006 and COL in Action, 2012). The process involves networking of the lifelong learning for farmers communities with all the stakeholders associated with their development. The consortium of universities with expertise in agriculture, animal and veterinary sciences, education, social sciences, open learning, technology and agricultural research and development institutions provides the contents and learning materials based on the needs of the rural communities while information and communication technology providers and kiosk or internet providers, mobile phones and audio-visual aid deliver the materials to the target farmers and when it involves financing, the banks comes in as financing stakeholder. The various stakeholders are active participants in a win-win situation (COL in Action, 2012). The lifelong learning for farmers project is an initiative of knowledge empowerment for rural development which leads to livelihood security. The objective of this paper is to x-ray lifelong learning for farmers potentials and its impact on poverty reduction among the commonwealth countries in achieving Millenium Development Goal of eradicating hunger and poverty.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Lifelong Learning for Farmers pilot project and its expansion

A fundamental principle for Commonwealth of Learning's new model was to avoid top-down planning and unidirectional communication and thereby improving the livelihood of millions of farmers and small holders on whom millions more people depend (John and Krishna, 2006). Commonwealth of Learning successfully introduced lifelong learning for farmers initiative as a pilot project in various villages in two regions of Tamil Nadu, India, Theni and Sivaganga. According to John and Krishna (2006), these villages, with different agricultural and socio-economic backgrounds, were chosen in consultation with the communities themselves. This is in line with the principles of lifelong learning for farmers for the farmers to decide on their needs and demands. In Tami Nadu, Commonwealth of Learning worked in partnership with stakeholders for creating a network. The consortium of institutions which included Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Tamil Nadu Open University, Anna University for Technology and University of Madras were used to develop the lifelong learning for farmers content for the regions. The information and communication technology and kiosk are set up by n-loque, a company that develop with the Indian Institute of Technology Chennai, a technology called WILL (wireless in a local loop), and they provides an intranet portal, video conferencing facilities and some generic content. The State Bank of India lends credit to contract farmers, putting the associations in contact with potential buyers it has identified for price and quality agreement. This arrangement provided insurance and confidence in all the parties involved in the process. All the stakeholders agreed that they would follow the process defined by Roling (1988) for a community based agricultural extension in terms of five crucial elements– Mobilisation, Organisation, Training, Technical Support and System management (Table 1).

Table 1: Phases of a Project

1	Mobilisation	Socio-cultural activation, sensitisation, con-sensitisation, understanding among the stakeholders, identifying the needs for capacity building from various stakeholders' view points.
2	Organisation	Identifying the organisation types, helping the communities to build organizations. Planning the programmes by the community through their organisations: linking the organisation with the banking sector for credit.
3	Training	Various forms of pedagogy including ICT enabled distance learning, interactive learning, learning by doing.
4	Technical Support	Support in trouble-shooting – linking the community with experts and other programmes, facilitation and supporting conflict-resolution mechanisms.
5	System Management	Enabling the community to run its own capacity programmes with its resources and with the support of the banking sector, ability to coordinate with other agencies.

Source: Rolling, (1988).

In the pilot project villages, the farmers and the agricultural labourers were mobilized into organisations such as Farmers Associations and Self-help Groups (SHGs). These associations and groups were linked with the State Bank of India which encourages credit under a contract farming system. Simultaneously, they were also linked with potential buyers identified by the Bank. Once the Associations/Self-help Groups and the buyer(s) reach a trade agreement, the bank gives credit to the association and group members. The advantage of scale and direct link to the buyers help to reduce "price spread" and create an efficient marketing system. Issue such as efficient inputs, quality management, forward linkages etc., became the central theme for learning. The SHGs of landless labourers and women's groups were also linked to appropriate credit programmes. Learning takes place through the information and communication technology kiosks in the villages (Balasubramanian, *et al.*, 2006).

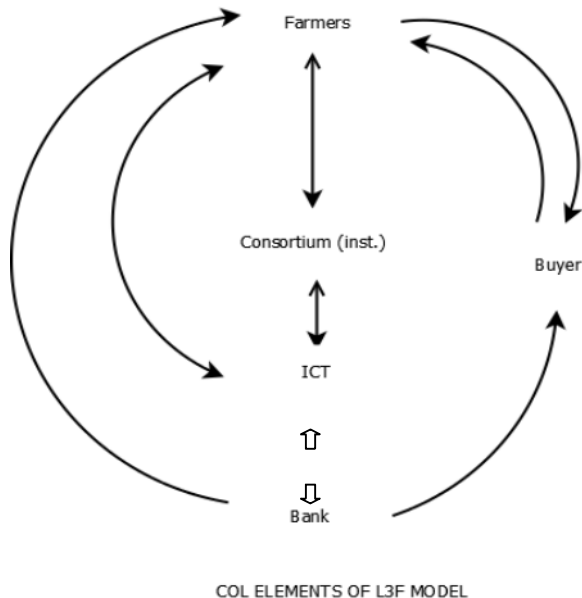


Fig: 1 Commonwealth of Learning element of L3F Model

Within a short time of its launching as a pilot project in Tamil Nadu villages in India, lifelong learning for farmers recorded great success which spawns replication in other villages around the region forming associations for implementation of the model with minimal facilitation from Commonwealth of Learning's lifelong learning for farmers. The project has drastically improved livelihoods while altering attitudes, social relationships and household dynamics (COL in Action, 2012). Commonwealth of Learning also worked with VIDYAL, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in the southern part of India, in 2008. The NGO helped in launching lifelong learning for farmers programme which centered on goat and sheep husbandry. This initiative transformed a lot of women in the area to become self reliant. The success of lifelong learning for farmers initiative in India led to its launch in some commonwealth countries such as Sri Lanka, Kenya, Uganda, Mauritius and Papua New Guinea (www.col.org/l3f).

Lifelong Learning for Farmers in Commonwealth Countries

Lifelong learning for farmers model and stakeholders in all the commonwealth countries where the initiative was launched were similar with differences in the needs and vision of the participating communities. However, most of the needs of lifelong learning for farmers were centered on agricultural production. The Indian experience has formed a bench mark for its framework and this make the implementation of the project easy to adopt and adapt to different cultures across the commonwealth countries. This pilot project was up scaled in other commonwealth countries such as Uganda, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Jamaica.

- **Sri Lanka:** Lifelong learning for farmers was introduced in 2008 in the rural community of Wathurukumbura in Kandy District. The needs of the farmers centered on tissue culture, Banana cultivation, mushroom farming, ginger and turmeric cultivation. The pilot project was initiated in four villages. Key partners in Sri Lanka were farmers, consortium of learning institutions (Open University of Sri Lanka, Eastern University, Export Development Board and Irrigation Department), information and communication technology kiosks (Vidhatha centres) and the bank (Rural Cooperative Bank of Sri Lanka). The project enabled the community to become self reliant rather than the donor dependency of the past. The project is successful and has led to development processes that are both sustainable and self replicating (COL in Action, 2012).
- **Uganda:** The project was introduced in South Western Uganda in 2007. The major aim is to link farmers, learning institutions, banks and processors using information and communication technology tools to effectively work together to alleviate poverty. The COL in Action (2012) reported that, the project worked with various innovation platforms (I P) that included Bufundi

potato IP, Bubare sorghum IP, Batwa honey value chain and small potato traders in Kampala. The information and communication technology facilitated the transfer of learning materials from consortium of institutions to rural farmers through tools like SMS, short audio messages which are usually developed in the farmers' local dialects.

- **Kenya:** The initiative was launched in 2007. It enabled farmers to gain knowledge and access loan from financial organizations leading to significant improvement in livelihood. Skill development of the programme focused on poultry keeping and management, financial management and accessing loans for self empowerment. The key lifelong learning for farmers partners in Kenya are Ikonzo Musanda Self Help Group, Kenya Aids Intervention Prevention Project Group and Ugunja Community Resources Center (UCRC).
- **Jamaica:** Here, Commonwealth of Learning partner with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, extension agencies and Rural Agricultural Development Authority (RADA) to introduced lifelong learning for farmers initiative through mobile technology which disseminated useful information on impending natural disasters and their management, pest management and agronomic practices. The project focused on recertification of RADA extension officers and strengthening an existing farmer training and support programme called Financial Assistance for Responsible Members (FARM).
- **Mauritius:** In this country, Commonwealth of Learning partnered with National Productivity Competitiveness Council (NPCC) to develop a successful pilot project on Mauritius Process Oriented Women Entrepreneurship Development (M-POWERED) with strong integration of lifelong learning for farmers for employment of women in the agricultural sector. Other stakeholders included small vegetable planters, Agricultural Research and Extension Unit (AREU), Farmers Service Centre (FSC), Association of Hotels and Restaurant of Mauritius (AHRIM), Ministry of Agro industry and Food Agricultural Research Council (FARC) and banks. Lifelong learning in Mauritius focused on enhancing self directed personal strategic learning among women vis-à-vis enterprises and livelihood security. Small vegetable planters received training by AREU on green house construction; green house management and green house crop management which enabled them produce high value agricultural produce (HVAP). The option of going into high value agricultural crops was the existing market with AHRIM which might have accounted for the planters' choice of investing in green house cultivation. The summary of lifelong learning for farmers performance in some commonwealth countries is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of lifelong learning for farmers in some Commonwealth countries

SN	Country	Communities	Year of introduction	Number of people involved	Skill acquired
1	India	Tami Nadu	2004	400	Goat/sheep
2	Sri lanka	Wathurakumbura in Kandy district	2007	300	Tissue culture, mushroom farming,
3	Kenya	Masai	2007	500	Poultry, savings and loan
4	Mauritius	Belle Mare and Troud'eau Douce	2007	700	Greenhouse construction and mgt and green house crops mgt
5	Uganda	Kabale and Batwa	2009	1000	Potato/sorghum and bee keeping
6	Jamaica	Jamaica		2480	Natural disaster mgt, pest mgt and agronomy of crop

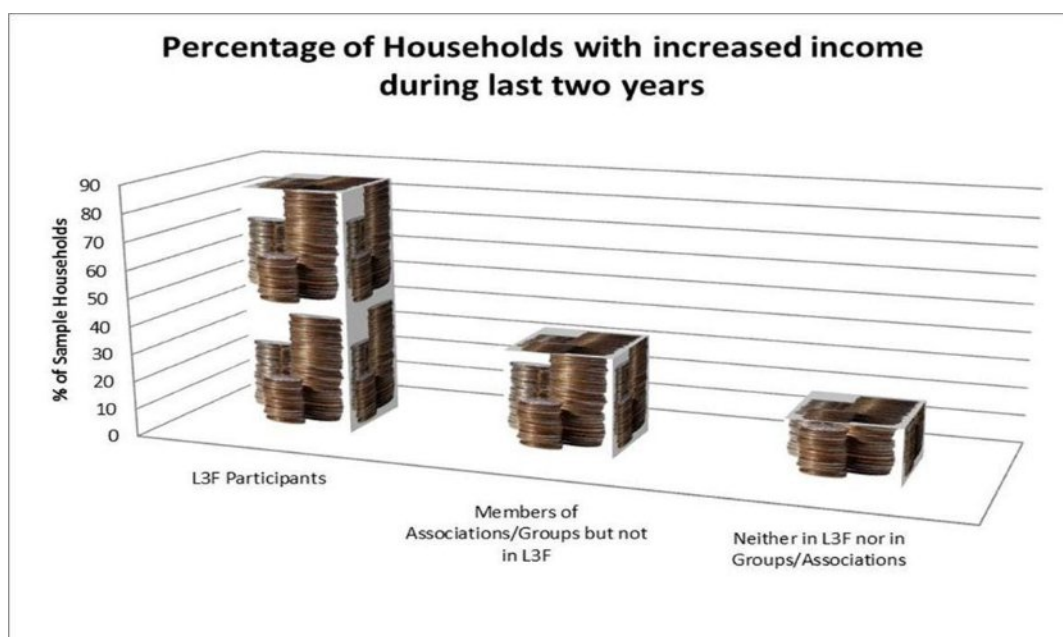
Sources: Connections, (2013), COL in Action, (2012) and www.col.org/l3f

Contribution of Lifelong Learning for Farmers to Poverty reduction and improved Livelihood

The initiative of lifelong learning for farmers by Commonwealth of Learning is to explore the possibility of integrating information and communication technology and open and distance learning for agricultural education, skill development, extension training of farmers and extension officials. Accordingly, Commonwealth of Learning and its partners developed ways to use information and communication technology to promote lifelong learning for farmers and thus contribute to rural poverty reduction (Balasubramanian, *et al.*, 2006). The success recorded in all the countries that the programme was launched; the rate of adoption and replication in neighboring communities; and the testimonies of participants and project coordinators were positive indicators to the potentials of growth of the programme and improved livelihood of the participants. John and Krishna (2006) observed that lifelong learning for farmers made a vital contribution to the long-awaited transformation of the rural economy in developing countries. The logic of the model, and key to its success, was that each stakeholder was a winner in the network process. Lifelong learning for farmers contributed to poverty reduction and improved livelihoods of farmers and their communities in the following ways:

- **Increased production:** The skills and knowledge acquired from the programme transformed the farmers' orientation and perception from traditional methods to modern methods of production. Connection (2012) reported that through lifelong learning for farmers initiative, Batwa people in Uganda learned to make use of modern bee hives that are more suitable for changing climate conditions and can produce honey throughout the year. This shift from on-season production to all year round production showed increase in the quantity of honey per year.
- **Increased income:** Increase in production would ordinarily lead to increase in income other things been equal. Participation of Indian women in lifelong learning for farmers has resulted in improvement in the quality of goats been reared and has increase their income significantly. Report of COL in Action (2012) indicated that lifelong learning for farmers participants' average income per flock was 80% more than non- lifelong learning for farmers farmers due to factors such as shorter kidding intervals, a greater number of kids born, more goats sold and lower mortality rates. The pilot project in Mauritius led to increase in the planters (farmers) current margin from 10% to 30% (Naren Sukurdeep, 2008). Similarly, report of a survey conducted by Rosemary (2012) indicated increased income of lifelong learning for farmers participants in Kenya and Uganda as shown in figure 2.

Fig. 2 Percentage increase in income of sampled population in Kenya and Uganda



Source: Rosemary, (2012)

- **Improved livelihood:** Training in financial management and savings help farmers to improve their living standard from the increased income generated through increased production. This was reflected in their ability to repay their loans within a short time while increasing their production and acquiring fixed assets. In India, the first 320 women repaid 90% of their loans, with interest, within three years (COL in Action, 2012). Most of them have purchased a small piece of land, often in the woman's name. The income is also invested in cartering for their family's basic needs such as food, education, health and shelter.
- **Rural community development:** Lifelong learning for farmers programme is a win-win project where all stakeholders lose nothing while improving farmers' livelihood. Similarly, as participants increase in number, output is also increased thus enhancing business activities in the communities. Generally, lifelong learning for farmers is all about community value addition which transformed people into resource persons who achieve enough production for themselves and surplus to help others (COL in Action, 2012).
- **Employment:** The lifelong learning for farmers project provided employment for the young and old and most especially women. They are self employed and could even be employers of labour if their production expand beyond family labour. In Sri Lanka, local women are finding employment in a laboratory where banana plants are being produced using tissue culture technology (www.col.org/l3f).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The lifelong learning for farmers project of Commonwealth of Learning is seen as a poverty alleviation strategy for developing countries. This is because of its positive impact on the farmer's standard of living, rate of expansion and self replication within a short time as well as the increasing number of participants that are yearning for it. The project has revived rural communities and transformed the rural economy of developing world, as such; it is an imperative tool for attainment of Millenium Development Goal of reducing/eradicating hunger and poverty. The adoption of the project by Commonwealth of Learning and up scaling it in all commonwealth countries would enhance the achievement of this goal globally.

Although the project achieved results through improving the livelihood of farmers and the rural economy, a lot need to be done by Commonwealth of Learning, government concern and private organizations for the project to expand and replicate in an increasing rate. In order to achieve this, the following strategies could be adopted.

- Commonwealth of Learning through the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) should mandate all commonwealth countries to adopt lifelong learning for farmers approach in their agricultural and information and communication technology developmental programmes to fast track sustainable development and poverty reduction;
- Non-Governmental Organizations should be encouraged by government through grants to enable them promote the project in the communities they operate and beyond.

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