

# *Creating Knowledge Networks for Sustainable Development*

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## Transcript

Let me begin with a brief introduction to my organisation the Commonwealth of Learning. The Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organization established by Commonwealth Heads of Government to serve the 54 Member States that span all regions of the globe. Our headquarters are in Vancouver and we have a regional office in New Delhi. Our overarching theme is 'learning for development'. COL's mission is to help Commonwealth Member States harness the potential of distance education and technologies to enhance access to learning which contributes to development.

Many Commonwealth countries are trying to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals by the fast-approaching target date of 2015. As such, the Commonwealth Heads of Government are concerned about how to address the rural-urban divides that keep more than half their populations from accessing vital global knowledge flows. The rural-urban divide is also a knowledge divide.

As we know, a knowledge divide is based on a complex interplay of social, political and economic factors. But I will focus on the knowledge divide that exists between formal knowledge sources and informal knowledge sources. In the formal knowledge source, it is primarily through codified learning that knowledge is accessed and utilised though tacit learning also plays a role.

In the informal knowledge domain, there is more emphasis on tacit learning even though codified learning is prevalent at a secondary level.

While formal knowledge sources are accessed based on class, resources, social status and government initiatives, large numbers of poor people operate at the level of informal knowledge gained through tacit learning.

Development can take place when all sources of learning and knowledge interact as a knowledge network. As Odame et al (2007) and Pant et al (2008) argue knowledge networking takes place when the

individuals, groups and communities are able to interact with and blend both the types of knowledge and learning: both formal and informal; codified and tacit.

The knowledge divide emerges when individuals, groups and communities do not have the access to this knowledge network.

Let me explain how the Commonwealth of Learning tries to address this challenge by taking an example from our Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative which presents an interesting example of how codified and tacit knowledge flows in both directions to create participatory knowledge networks. The Lifelong Learning for Farmers initiative aims to improve the skills and knowledge of farmers in rural agro-enterprises in Uganda, Kenya, Mauritius, Jamaica, PNG, India and Sri Lanka. Banks, universities and marketing agencies are the partners in this project. Banks provide the credit, universities provide expert knowledge and marketing agencies provide the outlets for selling the produce.

In India, COL has helped to strengthen a micro-finance and self-help group association of 5000 women members and a farmers' organisation with 600 members. Through specific mobilization activities, COL has supported institutions such as VIDIYAL and the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation to help these organizations emerge as Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs), with local weather stations, legal conciliation centres, etc. Data and information are collected on products, weather, market demand and supply, bank credit schemes, on a regular basis. The farmers' association conducts seed germination studies and quality assessments of seeds. Through online information bulletins, street notice boards, newsletters and voice mail messages on mobile phones, information on such topics reaches thousands of women and farmers on a daily basis. The farmers' organization and the women's organization have been trained by COL in developing audio learning materials for mobile phone based learning in animal husbandry and agriculture and are reaching nearly 2000 farmers and labourers every day.

In addition, specific efforts have been made to strengthen the tacit learning network of the farmers. For instance, the farmers and women members have bought mobile phones through bank credit for learning through voicemail in their own language. They have been encouraged to share their learning with other members of the association using mobile phones.

One of the important contributions of L3F is establishing linkages between formal and informal learning networks. The participatory content and learning material preparation process fostered intensive interaction among the actors from both the networks. A consortium of agricultural and veterinary universities are involved in supporting the farmers' and women's association in developing business plans and purchasing materials such as seeds, animals and other inputs. The women's association assesses the problems in a particular area, aggregates the queries and sends them to the universities.

The basic premise of L3F is a win-win framework for all the stakeholders and under this framework the farmers' and women's association play an active role in the universities' field research creating a reverse flow of valuable contributions. Data collected by the farmers were used by the universities for research activities. The under-graduate and graduate students of the universities undergo their field training under the supervision of the farmers. The distance learning materials developed by the farmers' association have been recognised by a university as textbook materials for diploma courses in agriculture and horticulture.

We can see how the divide between formal and informal knowledge sources can be closed through the use of various technologies. But as Professor Tim Unwin observes: ‘ICT have the potential to increase equality or to reduce them, depending on the social, political and economic contexts within which they are introduced’. As we know ICT do enable change and add value to the development process. But by themselves they do not create the development process. ICT strategies are only effective, sustainable and worth the effort if they are integrally linked to broader, more comprehensive development, education and poverty reduction strategies.

So let me conclude by raising the following questions:

1. At present the debate on knowledge is mostly concerned with formal knowledge sources and codified learning. Do we have strategies to understand the informal knowledge sources, tacit learning and there by understand the knowledge divide in terms of knowledge networking?
2. The changes in the demography, migration, socio-cultural stratification and emphasis on formal knowledge sources are undermining the informal knowledge source particularly among the poor leading to inter-generational and intra-generational knowledge divide. For example, the fishing communities have knowledge of various types of breezes, winds and storms — in many cases such knowledge is being lost to the younger generations, who are migrating to urban areas. There are gaps within the generations caused by differentials in terms of gender, class, caste etc. How can we address this?
3. The role of ICT in promoting indigenous knowledge and tacit learning needs more attention. Indigenous knowledge and tacit learning operate through specific socio-cultural protocols. This relates to specific cultural practices e.g. the local medicine person. How can the use of ICT be aligned to harness this wealth of tacit indigenous knowledge available in various languages/ dialects to address the great development challenges of our time?

Thank you for your kind attention.