Overcoming Inequality in an Unequal World: Developing Sustainable Partnerships in Open and Distance Learning

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It is a privilege to speak to such a distinguished audience, and I'm very grateful to the organizers, Prof Tian Belawati, Prof Viet and Dr Thanh, for giving me this opportunity.

The Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) is a very dynamic and diverse organization that continues to make exciting new contributions to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the Asian region and beyond. I have found AAOU conferences enriching both professionally and personally. Coming back to my fifth AAOU and to Hanoi is then a double privilege.

I represent the Commonwealth of Learning, an intergovernmental organisation based in Vancouver, Canada that has been a consistent supporter of the AAOU. Our motto 'learning for development' underscores a vision that moves us beyond formal face-to-face education into non-formal modes of learning and has given a new meaning to Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

Over the 22 years of its existence, COL has not only expanded the definition of what we mean by ODL but has also convinced Commonwealth Member States to see the value of harnessing ODL methodologies for achieving development goals. You can see that the 54 Commonwealth countries cover all regions of the globe—from the Pacific through to the Caribbean.

It has become obvious to the global community that if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be achieved by 2015, it would require close collaboration between both developed and developing countries. It is for this reason that since the turn of the century, the discourse of development has been dominated by an emphasis on partnership. The former Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, believed that partnership was not an option but a necessity in the new world order.

In this presentation, I shall first examine what we mean by partnerships, and then review some models of partnership within open universities that have evolved over the last forty years. I shall then take up three examples of multi-stakeholder partnerships from the work of the Commonwealth of Learning. Finally, from the lessons learned, I shall propose the ways forward towards developing sustainable partnerships that will have implications for all of us, whether we work in academia or in development.

What is Partnership?

First of all, what do we mean by partnership? Is it simply the alliance of people/organizations who wish to do something together?

Brinherhoff defines partnership as 'a dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labour based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner' (P 14)

Combining joint efforts in initiatives results in synergies that prove that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.

As Manuel Castells reminds us, 'Synergy effects depend on adding value because of successful integration in a process of production that yields higher productivity, and thus profit, for its components.' (Castells, 2009, p. 82). By bringing together the comparative advantages of the various actors, it is possible to eliminate duplication of effort and achieve results which are not possible for the partners to achieve alone.

But we live in a very unequal world. Are partnerships possible in such imperfect conditions? How does one address the inequality among the various partners?   Because very often, partnerships are not among equals. In the field of development, there are partnerships among developed nations, (OECD countries, for example), among developing nations (the African Union, for instance) and between developed and developing nations. It is particularly in this last category that the inequality is very pronounced and poses the greatest challenge. It is this inequality that stands between ideals and accomplishments. Does it mean that all partnerships are destined to fail? How can results be achieved for the mutual benefit of all irrespective of the inequalities?

In the literature on the subject, partnerships are seen either as positive and desirable, or as replicating the broader power relations that exist within society.

In the first case, partnerships are seen to confer several advantages such as i) increasing efficiency and effectiveness; ii) providing access to a range of resources and services; iii) leading to a win-win situation, and iv) helping establish participatory approaches (Brinkerhoff, 2002, p.6).

On the other hand, partnerships are viewed as a 'loaded process' (Morse & McNamara, 2006). Power is integral to any relationship, and this power can be exercised by the ones holding the resources to shape the behaviour and outcomes of the 'beneficiaries' in their own favour. This unspoken power can also be wielded in creating so-called consensus.Partnership then becomes mere tokenism and the relationship is that of a benefactor- beneficiary. The rhetoric and reality of partnership needs to move away from this dimension to that of respecting and valuing the contributions of even the smallest partners in the group.

How can we move beyond these binaries?

How have the open universities dealt with partnerships?

Partnership Models in Open Universities

Open Universities around the world have been pioneers in establishing different models of partnership. Traditionally, higher education institutions have been obliged to – and expected to – maintain their competitive edge through exclusivity and elitism. Open Universities, on the other hand, were meant to be people's universities. It was not possible for open universities to set up their own campuses in the remote and far flung places where their students were located. Therefore, they had to forge partnerships with local institutions to provide support services to their students. It was also necessary to partner with specialist entities, such as media providers.

For example, the Open University UK's collaboration with the BBC is now globally renowned.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) continues to maintain a close link with the Doordarshan, the national TV channel, to broadcast its programmes all over the country and with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to provide teleconferencing facilities at its several regional/study centres spread over the country.

The changing character of higher education has led to the evolution of differentiated types of HEI's resulting not only in the emergence of private distance education providers, but also in increased numbers of partnerships between public and private institutions. For example, the Open University of Malaysia (OUM), a private institution, is a consortium of 11 public sector HEIs. This model promotes: i) collaboration among public-private institutions through the pooling of academic talent; ii) economies of scale, and iii) a win-win situation by making academics business partners in a joint enterprise.

Then there are Open Universities which enter cross-border partnerships. The partnership between the OUUK and the Arab Open University is an interesting example. With its HQ in Kuwait, it has branches in 7 countries: Kuwait Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. The OUUK, by its partnership with one institution has reached out to a large student body in seven jurisdictions and by adapting to diverse cultural, academic and regulatory contexts, is catering more effectively to its growing corpus of multi-cultural students within the UK. And the AOU is enabled to offer the UKOU course materials, adopt international standards and build the capacity of its own staff , thereby enhancing the overall quality of education. So clearly it's a win-win situation for all.

The African Virtual University has 53 centres in 27 countries in Africa, and is an example of an institution cutting across borders and language barriers to provide infrastructure and build capacity in Open Distance and eLearning. The AVU is a consortium of several universities in Africa and has links with North American institutions.

As the trend towards internationalization grows, more and more open universities will continue to forge partnerships across borders.

One can then trace three broad types of partnership models within distance education institutions. It must be noted here that this classification covers the most obvious and known categories of institutions only, such as single mode, dual mode and consortia. It does not cover some of the recent and emerging types of partnership.

1. Some partnerships are forged to strengthen the parent ODL institution by linking with local institutions and other specialized agencies.
2. Then there are multi-lateral partnerships with ODL and conventional institutions, public and private providers within national boundaries.
3. The third set of partnerships is established on a north-south; south-south basis to reach out to international students through the use of the internet and blended approaches as in the case of AVU and the OUUK.

ODL for Development

But while ODL flourished in its provision of higher education, in the last ten years, we have seen ODL being harnessed for development as well. The Commonwealth of Learning has developed several models that bring together the strengths of partnership to scale up and sustain results.

I will look at three in particular.

I. VUSSC

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is a consortium of 32 small states of the Commonwealth which have come together to develop capacity in online course development, develop courses that are need-based and freely available and offer these courses through existing tertiary-level institutions in the participating countries.

It is a network that seeks to strengthen national tertiary institutions in the participating countries and focuses on capacity building and the design and delivery of new courses.

It is clear that the institutions in the 32 participating countries have different governance structures and very diverse work cultures. Differing quality standards and recognition of qualifications across different jurisdictions can prevent the materials from being adopted – one of the reasons why the participants have developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework, a mechanism for students' mobility and the regional accreditation of courses .

The VUSSC partners are Ministries of Education, tertiary institutions, Qualifications Authorities, Quality Assurance Agencies and funding organizations. COL is coordinating the initiative, but the partners are in the driving seat. VUSSC uses a bottom-up participatory approach in which it is imperative to engage each partner on an ongoing basis. This collaboration is not easy and is done through constant communications using BaseCamp; Wiki Educator, frequent teleconferences, emails and face-to-face meetings.

There is one lesson I would like to particularly highlight. It is the three-week bootcamps during which the course materials are developed. Here is the picture of one held in the Maldives at which 19 countries participated to develop course materials in Sustainable Agricultural Development.

This course development process combines and infuses different cultural perspectives in the content, giving it a wider pan-Commonwealth orientation. What develops through these intercultural exchanges is what Raybourn et al (2003, p 106; in Evan et al, p. 851) call the 'third culture'—which is neither one culture or the other, but a combination of what the participants create jointly. More productive synergy, that Castells refers to.

II. Open Education Resources for Open Schooling (OER4OS)

Open Schools are urgently needed to provide access to education for millions of children who currently have no access to any formal schooling. While the world average for secondary school enrolment is 66%, the Gross Enrolment Rate in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is 34%.

(EFA Global Monitoring report 2010)

As more and more countries achieve Universal Primary Education in Sub Saharan Africa, the surge towards secondary schooling is going to mount. Unable to invest in brick and mortar institutions, countries will increasingly opt for open schooling and private provision. COL is helping countries plan and implement open schools to expand access to secondary education. However, the establishment of open schools requires investment of resources both financial and human. How can these be spread across and shared by a range of partners?

COL decided to test the answer to that question by working on a six-country partnership to develop 20 sets of course materials in print and online formats, based on the secondary curricula of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia. The materials are being developed as Open Education Resources (OER), so that without duplicating effort, participating countries can have access to quality materials that they could adopt and adapt as necessary. This massive project involves a range of partners in six very different countries—ministries of education, schools, teachers, consultants.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which has supported various OER projects in higher education, including the MIT's OpenCourseWare initiative, came forward to support this work that combines the professional development of teachers with the development of OER. It is expected that providing high-quality course materials free of cost and enhancing the capacity of teachers will contribute to improving, among other things, the quality of secondary education in both open and conventional schools in the participating countries. This is a partnership that promises great benefits.

The lesson I would like to highlight is that there must be a robust communication system between and among partners, if the results are to be achieved in a timely fashion. Keeping in constant touch meant using a range of technologies—BaseCamp, Skype conferences, Facebook, Email.

We found that there was a direct correlation between the frequency of communication and the results achieved. The participant ts who were most active on Basecamp were also the first to deliver on course materials. This demonstrates the importance of communication in building sustainable partnerships.

III. Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F)

ODL can contribute to poverty reduction (MDG 1) by the development of skills training packages for poor communities. COL has developed an initiative to promote Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F).

One such project has been initiated in southern India. This project has been undertaken with a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called*Vidiyal* which is a federation of 239 women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). 320 women were trained in goat-rearing enterprises, negotiating with banks to obtain credit and to sell their produce through cooperatives. They were encouraged to buy basic mobile phones. The purpose of the mobile phone was to enhance lifelong learning opportunities.

Vidiyal then entered into an agreement with IKSL-AirTel group, one of the biggest mobile service providers in Southern India, to send audio messages and voice mails to the women through mobile phones. Vidiyal created nearly 500 audio messages in the local language of about 60 seconds each on topics such as buying goats, feed management, disease and health management, and marketing management.

Vidiyal also encouraged these women to discuss enterprise issues with one another using mobile phones, resulting in a horizontal transfer of knowledge. The vertical transfer of knowledge took place when they sought expert advice from the participating universities and research institutions.

This partnership involves different stakeholders: the village community; the banks, agriculture and veterinary institutions, ICT operators, NGOs and the market. Catalysed by an objective and non-partisan agency such as the Commonwealth of Learning, the partnership results in a win-win situation for all. The village community benefits by: i) getting more credit at lower interest rates; ii) income generation; and iii) opportunities for lifelong learning in areas of interest and relevance to them. The advantage for the banks is that: i) they have a larger credit market; ii) lower transaction costs; and iii) reduced Non-Performing-Asset rates. Universities are able to i) strengthen their extension services; and ii) conduct research on the initiative. The ICT providers increase their income and customer-base and the markets stand to gain because of lower transaction costs and quality products. The NGOs become more self-sustainable and rely less on external support as they undertake this role as social entrepreneurs.

I would like to highlight the fact that learning has resulted in clear gains for the women. A recent study indicated that the goats of the lifelong learners did much better than those belonging to the non-participating members of the community

Conclusion: towards sustainable partnerships

In conclusion, what have we learnt from the partnerships that we have just examined? How do we create equal partnerships in an unequal world? How do we create the conditions for sustainability?

Wiley (2007) provides a clear definition:

'the ability of a project to continue its operations . . . and to accomplish[ing] goals. . . ."

Sustainability is not necessarily related to money or financial resources. Sustainable partnerships, require the development of 'social capital'.

Putnam defines social capital in terms of three components: a) moral obligations and norms, b) social values (particularly *trust*) and c) social networks.

Partnerships operate within the framework of social interaction, social relationships and social networks. It strengthens social capital by uniting multiple agencies through a common goal with meaningful interactions based on the sharing of knowledge, skills and resources.

Hence sustainable partnerships need to be perceived within the broader context of social capital

We have seen examples of how very unequal partners can come together in ways through which everyone is transformed. To sum up:

First, any partnership must be based on an acknowledged "win-win" framework, reflecting both tangible and intangible benefits for all. We have seen evidence of this phenomenon in the L3F project.

Secondly, it is clear that the partners in any arrangement are probably going to be at different levels of development. Capacity building, then, becomes a major imperative. However, if the partnership is to be sustained, then efforts must be made to move the partners to the next level of capability maturation, which means the empowerment of the actors to make a difference. This means that the lead/catalytic agency involved such as COL, must follow the initiative through to its logical conclusion with a clear vision and exit strategy.

Thirdly, sustainable partnerships benefit from more than effective formal mechanisms that may be put in place. Very often it is a careful combination of both formal and informal processes that produces a sustainable partnership.

Fourthly, each partnership is unique and specific to its context and culture. Therefore, for any partnership to be sustainable there needs to be appropriate sensitivity to diversity and difference. There must be a continuing awareness that partnerships are dynamic and change and develop over time, transforming far beyond the original intent.

Fifthly, as ICT infrastructure and capacity increases in the developing world, social networking tools will make it possible to forge cost-effective and more equal partnerships using appropriate technologies.

Development language has changed over time. 'Beneficiaries' are now known as stakeholders and partners. The language may have changed, but has reality? It would seem partnerships project a hope for the future and present the possibility of transforming an unequal world.

And on that hopeful note, let me thank you for your attention.