

Education: Creating Opportunity, Realising Potential

Sir John Daniel, President of the Commonwealth of Learning

Royal Commonwealth Society, London

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Report by Ian Cheffy, BALID Executive Committee, May 2005

This was a presentation of the Commonwealth of Learning, by its President and chief executive officer, Sir John Daniel, formerly Assistant Director General for Education at UNESCO and vice-chancellor of the Open University. COL is an intergovernmental organisation created in 1987 by the Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education, knowledge, resources and technologies among Commonwealth countries. It is the only intergovernmental agency with this focus. Its headquarters are in Vancouver but it also has a small office in Delhi.

Sir John began his outline of the work of COL by linking it to the Millennium Development Goals.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

COL recognises that rural communities are crucial to development so it aims to empower farmers and smallholders to give them more control over their lives. Citing the example of a COL project in Tamil Nadu, Sir John explained how COL works with farmers so that they can articulate their needs, and with established information sources in the area such as universities to provide whatever expertise is necessary to meet the needs of the farmers. Information is disseminated through local radio and ICT kiosks. Local banks are encouraged to respond to the particular financial circumstances of the farmers which are different from those of commercial borrowers.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

COL is focusing on assisting with the training of teachers, given that the lack of teachers is a serious obstacle to the achievement of this goal. Distance learning has been shown to be an effective strategy in this area. COL is working with teacher training colleges to develop their capacity and is promoting the development of a pan-Commonwealth qualification for teachers.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

COL's promotion of ICT is helping to improve the quality of education available to girls. Sir John commented that in some areas, such as the Caribbean, educational achievement among girls has risen to the extent that there is concern that boys are now falling behind.

Goals 4-6: Reduce infant mortality, improve maternal health, and combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases

COL has a number of projects in this area. It is committed to providing appropriate information to people in an appropriate form, using their own language and ways of conveying information. Above all, COL aims to equip people to produce relevant information themselves, and has supported "peer health educators", young people who disseminate health messages at school and village level using drama and video. COL has a large number of international partners; in conjunction with the WHO and NGOs in South Africa and Sri Lanka it has produced radio messages relevant to the urban poor.

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

COL is working with groups in India to develop teaching materials relevant to this issue.

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Two thirds of the 53 countries in the Commonwealth have particular needs in that they are either landlocked or small independent islands. COL has just begun a project to develop a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth in order to promote the exchange of information and expertise in subject areas of particular relevance to these countries.

Continuing his talk, Sir John explained that COL's concerns are wide ranging. It has considerable expertise in higher education, where it focuses on technology and quality assurance, and it has assisted a university in Kenya to develop an e-learning programme for some of its courses. COL is also becoming increasingly interested in non-formal education. It is committed not only to sustainability but also to self-replication so that its projects can be copied easily by others. It therefore aims to be a catalyst and to focus primarily on developing contacts and promoting ideas, rather than providing funds. It is committed to maximising the use of local resources.

His conclusion was that the educational needs of developing countries, and especially those which are in the Commonwealth, are so significant that new approaches in education, such as those initiated by COL, are essential if the development needs of these countries are to be met. Although COL is a small organisation with a limited budget, being dependent largely on voluntary contributions from Commonwealth states, the innovations promoted by COL have had a significant effect in many areas.

Assessment

COL is a good example of how the disparate nations of the Commonwealth can work together effectively, based on their ongoing links as a community of nations. In this sense, COL's initiatives are less subject to changes in international policy than is often the case in international aid. COL acts as a catalyst, focusing on using the resources which already exist within individual Commonwealth countries and encouraging the sharing of resources between countries. As such, this COL is involved not so much in North-South aid as in South-South aid.

COL's primary strategy is to build on the informal relationships which exist between Commonwealth countries to make connections and to facilitate inter-country cooperation. It aims to make links at the highest levels in government so that that appropriate programmes can be developed at the lowest levels of the community; in this respect, its work is congruent with the sustainable livelihoods approach which has begun to receive attention in recent years.

As is inevitable with projects which involve telecommunications, the success of its projects depends on an adequate telecommunications infrastructure, so its projects do not benefit those who do not have access to these technologies. Nevertheless, COL is making an important contribution to building capacity in less developed countries.

Given that COL's programme is limited by the constraint of being dependent on voluntary contributions from member states for its core funding, it is important for the industrialised countries within the Commonwealth to show their commitment to COL in financial terms on an ongoing basis such that longer range planning will be more easily achievable.

As an organisation committed to development, BALID welcomes COL's commitment to education and capacity building. While its focus on distance learning is very specific, it has applied this approach to a broad range of development needs. COL is making a significant contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the countries of the Commonwealth.

See www.col.org for further information.