

Lifelong Learning for Farmers travels the last mile



Krishna Alluri

Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3Farmers) is a Commonwealth of Learning (COL) initiative designed to help poor rural communities acquire relevant knowledge in a sustainable manner for economic advancement. Although the objective is essentially poverty-related, it has complementary social, educational and health dimensions. Officially launched in December 2004 in two rural areas in South India, the programme already has many successes to celebrate.

The concept is conceived

COL began to explore opportunities for applying open and distance learning (ODL) in the context of the rural economy in the last 1990s. Because the majority of the world's poor are in rural areas, improving the rural economy is critical to achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This work is an important part of COL's current strategy.

L3Farmers began as action research. COL convened electronic discussion involving experts in agriculture, rural development and in ODL from all over the world about possible new ODL initiatives for the rural economy. This led to the development of a concept note entitled 'Enabling Lifelong Learning Opportunities for Smallholder Farmers in Africa, Asia and Small Island States through Global Partnerships', which was discussed in a consultation meeting during the 2002 Pan-Commonwealth Forum in Durban, South Africa. This discussion involved a number of Indian educators along with representatives from other Commonwealth countries with interests in this area.

Following the forum, COL converted this group into a network linked electronically to continue discussions on how to use information and communications technologies (ICT) in agricultural research and development. A facilitator commissioned by COL began setting up face-to-face consultations with more people and groups with interests in agriculture, education, ICT, community development and financing.

In early 2004, COL facilitated the development of a synthesis report based on various electronic discussions and a meeting on 'Life Long Learning for Farmers: Open, distance and technology-mediated learning for extension for smallholders' that identified four action research items. The first one led to commissioning a review of all the ICT for development initiatives in India, followed by four prominent projects for on-site field evaluation.

After the review suggested there was the potential to integrate best practices from these and other rural ICT programmes, COL put together a plan for implementing the L3Farmers programme. At the next Pan-Commonwealth Forum in Dunedin, New Zealand in 2004, the networked organisations met to review the plan and agreed to form a consortium to take it forward.

Meeting a distinct need

The need for an initiative like L3Farmers stems from a simple problem: the wealth of information resulting from agricultural research and development fails to travel the last mile to where it is most needed, the villages of the developing world. In India, there is one agricultural extension worker for every 1,150 farmers. Add in 'landless labourers' and each extension worker has the impossible task of serving 2,500 people.

COL has been exploring whether technology can help scale up extension services. Many villages in India are equipped with ICT kiosks as a result of governmental or commercial initiatives. Since each kiosk provides its village with Internet and telephone connections, the possibility exists for these kiosks to provide useful information and bridge that last mile to the individual farmer. However, the impact of the kiosks has been limited by the top-down manner in which they were originally introduced. By simply conveying knowledge on new agricultural technologies from researcher to farmer, this system ignored the experience and innovation that farmers had to offer.

India was chosen for the following reasons.

- Indian mainstream agricultural extension services are under-resourced and fail to reach vulnerable segments of the rural community, particularly landless women labourers. There is a demonstrable need in India for new approaches to information and knowledge for farmers and other workers.
- Rural credit is under-developed. Few banks have developed the strategies needed to effectively reach and serve the rural sector.
- Lacking the resources to launch a project like this on totally new ground, COL is able to build on existing programmes and infrastructure in India. Many areas of the country have experience with ICT for development initiatives; COL has been involved in two initiatives in India already. The pace of ICT development in India is rapid and supported by government.



University of Agriculture Makurdi



Mission and mandate

University of Agriculture Makurdi, was established in January 1988 to train needed manpower. The tripartite linkage of teaching, research and extension training objective is to accelerate production, ascertain food self-sufficiency and security, enhance farm incomes, increase foreign exchange earning from agriculture, provide raw materials for agro-industrialisation and promote rural employment.

Academic programmes

The University offers Bachelor and Postgraduate degrees in various programmes domiciled in the Colleges of Agronomy, Animal Science, Agricultural Economics, Extension and Management Technology, Forestry and Fisheries, Food Technology, Engineering, Science, Agricultural and Science Education and Veterinary Medicine. The Postgraduate School co-ordinates postgraduate studies for all Colleges.

Activities in the Colleges are interlinked with those of the University Commercial Farm, Directorate Teaching and Research Farm, Directorate of Research Development, Centre for Food and Agricultural Strategy, Centre for Agro-chemical Technology, Seed Technology Centre and the Co-operative Extension Centre.

Outreach

Two directorates also have outreach responsibilities:

- (i) Directorate of Linkages – For establishing and fostering relationship with other institutions, and
- (II) Directorate of Alumni Relations – For coordinating and sustaining ties between the University and her graduates.



Professor
Emmanuel O.
Ogunwolu

Contact

Office of the Vice-Chancellor
University of Agriculture Makurdi
P.M.B. 2373
Makurdi
Benue State
Nigeria
Tel: +234 44 533204/5
Fax: +234 44 533182
e-mail: vco_uam@yahoo.com

- COL has linkages with numerous agricultural and veterinary science universities and institutions with expertise in ODL and ICT applications. It was easier to plan and develop L3Farmers on these foundations than to enter completely new terrain.
- India offers an appropriate 'laboratory' for the first test of the model, because even in the small area chosen for the project – two districts in Tamil Nadu – there is a range of socio-economic and cultural differences as well as more than one agro-climatic zone. If the model works across these differences, it reduces the possibility that the results are too narrowly context-specific.

The four partners

L3Farmers introduced a new model. Farmers were encouraged to form an association and create their own vision of development for their village. This could be acquiring better livestock, growing new crops or improving the way they market their produce. Those ideas often generate simple questions: How do I identify a good cow? How do I keep wild boars off my land when they are a protected species? How can I get my produce to market in good condition?

The next step is to get those with information to work together to answer these questions. In Tamil Nadu, India, COL helped to create a consortium that included:

- Tamil Nadu Agricultural University
- Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University
- Tamil Nadu Open University
- Anna University (for technology inputs), and
- University of Madras (for social science inputs).

ICT kiosks are used to link the farmers to this consortium. Farmers are prepared to pay for useful information, such as very local weather forecasts. The commercial kiosk operator and franchisee, usually a local youth, become a stakeholder in the project with an interest in providing information that helps to make the initiative sustainable.

In Tamil Nadu, the ICT kiosks are set up by n-Logue, a company that developed with the Indian Institute of Technology Chennai a technology called Wireless in Local Loop. Each village kiosk has a Pentium computer with digital camera, uninterruptible power supply (UPS) and printers. n-Logue provides an Intranet portal, videoconferencing facilities and some generic content, but the local franchisee has to develop local content in response to demand.

The fourth partner in this project, along with the farmers, the kiosk operators and the educational institutions, is the commercial banks. The banks in India are being encouraged by the government to increase rural lending. Currently there is very little lending from the banks to the rural economy because of high transaction costs and low loan repayment rates. The L3Farmers model offers ways to overcome these hurdles. Information provided through ICT kiosks improves the knowledge and capability of farmers. This, in turn, improves productivity, return on investment and repayment of loans, which also enlarges the market for bank credit for small farmers and landless labourers.



The State Bank of India links credit to a contract farming system, putting the associations in contact with potential buyers it has identified. Once an association and a buyer reach a trade agreement that defines price and quality, the bank gives credit to the association and its members. The advantages of scale and a direct link to the buyers create an efficient marketing system and reduce price spread.

A better cow

An example of how the system works is a farmers' association that decided improving dairy production was their best route to better prosperity. Their key question to the information providers was 'How do I distinguish a good milk cow from a poor milk cow?' The education specialists developed a checklist with diagrams. Women from a nearby village who were familiar with web programming made it into an instructional sequence on the computer in the ICT kiosk.

The bank loaned money to the farmers to improve their dairy cows and linked the farmers with a dairy company from a nearby town, which agreed to buy a guaranteed quantity of milk and take it to market provided that the farmers met certain quality standards.

Already farmers are reporting benefits from this programme. While the average yield of milk per cow is six to seven litres a day, the cows bought through the L3Farmers programme are yielding between eight and ten litres a day. These incremental improvements can have a huge overall impact.

Assessing the impact

Almost two years after it was launched as a pilot project in four villages, L3Farmers is working well. The bank has made loans of about US\$200,000 to 120 villages, with approximately the same amount in the works for 100 more villagers. Another 300 people are preparing loan applications. This is in a region where one of the villages had previously been blacklisted by the banks because of a poor loan repayment record.

About 60 per cent of the farmers involved are women. In the past, buying a cow was traditionally the men's responsibility; they would buy it and then hand it over to the women to care for it. L3Farmers has taught both women and men how to select and purchase a healthy cow, how to insure a cow and how to claim insurance if the cow dies. When a woman recovered the insured amount after her cow died, her fellow villagers were amazed. Insurance was a new concept for them.

Some 500 villagers regularly attend the ICT-based learning sessions. Initially the communities were hesitant to use the Internet, but once they started to hear local voices and see familiar faces, they relaxed and lost their fear of the technology.

In addition to the cow-buying module, learning materials have also been developed about topics such as managing a dairy shed, nutrition management in dairy, quality milk production, agricultural techniques and biofertiliser production. Already, 12 CD-Roms, four newsletters and six Internet/intranet presentations have been completed.

L3Farmers is changing the lives of many people, according to Dr. Patrick Spaven, a UK-based professional external evaluator who recently completed a case study about the programme for COL. His report includes these reflections:

'For anyone who met the stakeholders and visited the villages... it would be difficult to come away without a very positive impression. The optimism and excitement among the stakeholders was palpable. This even included hard-nosed banking officials. The interests of all the stakeholders are being addressed and the mutual awareness of this among the consortium members underpins their confidence in the project.

'Meeting with farmers in four of the villages produced a wave of personal accounts of benefit, ranging from improvements in milk yields, to attitude changes such as a determination to plan for, rather than be resigned to, the future. Some women in particular appear to be experiencing transformational changes in their lives.'

Self-replication – the ultimate goal

One of the goals of L3Farmers is that its success (see Box 1) spawns replication in other villages and regions. Three neighbouring villages in Tamil Nadu have formed associations for implementing the model, with minimal help from L3Farmers. A local cooperative, non-governmental organisation (NGO) with 5,000 women has asked to join the process.

Box 1 Key success factors

While stakeholder optimism is common in the early stages of development projects, it is not always sustained. There are several factors that suggest the optimism about L3Farmers may be justified.

- The project is designed around the interests of stakeholders; they have ownership and mutual trust.
- The stakeholder interests are mutually supportive.
- The model is centred on self-directed learning, which is known to be a powerful motivator.
- There is a very important gender equity component to the project, which is central to sustainable development. Sixty percent of the L3Farmers participants are women, and all the evidence so far points to the project impacting them most strongly.
- Apart from COL's mediation and modest seed funding, there are no outside variables, such as major donor intervention, on which the model depends.
- The project works with the grain of national policy and practice in ICT and development of the rural economy.
- The project was well-researched, was developed consultatively and has well-structured planning, monitoring and evaluation built in. It is competently managed.



It is important to recognise that this is development without donors. COL has spent less than US\$80,000, mostly on local consultancies. All other resources have come from routine local sources, notably the loans from the bank to the farmers.

COL is building on the encouraging experience of Lifelong Learning for Farmers to develop the programme in other regions of the Commonwealth, starting with West Africa. While the conditions are different there, with weaker credit and knowledge infrastructures, COL is exploring which factors can be transferred to this environment to be adapted as necessary for local circumstances.

L3Farmers demonstrates many of COL's strengths, including:

- the value and diversity of COL's networks
- COL's ability to mobilise people and organisations through a highly consultative approach and the building of trust
- that COL can address the MDGs and work effectively outside the mainstream education sector
- that COL can research, plan, deliver and evaluate in project mode, with the help of the right resource people.

Most importantly, L3Farmers showcases COL's ability to mobilise people and organisations, and make effective use of ICT to facilitate learning for development.

Biographical notes

D. Krishna Alluri joined the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in January 1997. First working in India, he has been involved in agricultural research, training and development for almost 30 years. He was associated with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), and was an employee of both the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI, Philippines) and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA, Nigeria).

His aim is to contribute towards poverty alleviation by empowering the rural poor through the extension of education and improved agricultural technologies. In collaboration with some developing countries and CGIAR centres, he is currently working on non-formal education projects involving training, research and extension.

As Education Specialist, Food Security and Environment, he is responsible for developing activities where distance education and open learning applications could be promoted and encouraged in the agricultural, forestry and fisheries sectors, including all ongoing work.