

The use of media empowerment

Addressing health issues and other MDGs



David Walker

In order to be truly of service to the underprivileged and rural poor, the appropriate use of technology must create conditions and mechanisms that can provide people with genuine access to information. Such mechanisms will offer ways in which people can express their sentiments, opinions, views, dreams and aspirations, their fears and insecurities, their strengths and capabilities, as well as their potential for development.

High illiteracy rates and low levels of schooling among disadvantaged groups, especially women, in many developing countries continue to limit their ability to lift themselves out of poverty. Despite demands for increased education, the conventional system is unable to respond to this need, which exists on such a massive scale. Consequently, disadvantaged groups continue to be denied access to information, knowledge, skills and technology transfer. In order to empower disadvantaged groups as equal partners in development, the limitations of formal and non-formal education sectors are now being challenged.

Through its Media Empowerment programme, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is employing new ways to achieve mass production and delivery of training and information that are both efficient and effective. Creative use of media allows for informed decision making by a nation's citizens concerning issues such as poverty, governance, education, health, gender and environment (see Box 1). These have been the focal areas of the Media Empowerment effort. These issues are also the focus of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the targets set by the United Nations to be achieved by 2015. COL's Media Empowerment (COLME) activities work directly with disadvantaged groups, allowing them to partake in the information and communications technologies (ICT) revolution to address their own issues and also to demonstrate to local policy makers the possibilities of effective, low-cost solutions that aim at employment opportunities and skills development for the community and nation (see Box 2).

Addressing health issues

Raising awareness of health information is one of the most effective ways of meeting health challenges in the developing world. Open and distance learning (ODL) using mass media is a powerful tool that can be used to inform and educate those who might otherwise remain unaware of issues that directly affect them. COL's Media Empowerment programme is

demonstrating how low-cost media applications can make a significant impact on health problems.

The MDGs underpin COL's Three-year Plan 2006-2009. With three of the MDGs focused on health (reduction of infant mortality, improvement of maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases), COL recognised the need to apply its expertise in ODL to address health issues.

COL's Media Empowerment programme works in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), aligning COL's efforts to the WHO's priorities in developing countries, specifically communicable diseases with an emphasis on HIV/AIDS. COL liaises with WHO country offices to identify key players – mainly in-country non-governmental organisations – which are focused on the health concerns of disadvantaged groups. COL provides these

Box 1 What is media empowerment?

COL's Media Empowerment programme uses distance education and open and distance learning methodologies to:

- reduce the digital divide and contribute to MDGs and Education for All through the creative use of radio, educational broadcasting and online education;
- provide media models that stress local participation and transfer of knowledge and skills, amplifying the dissemination of local knowledge;
- create a core of skilled personnel that COL and other development organisations can draw upon for in-country training;
- provide opportunities for disadvantaged groups to participate and benefit from new technology and media-based initiatives;
- create dialogue among government sectors, institutions and interest groups;
- provide new skills and sustainable employment for rural poor;
- contribute to a body of knowledge and best practices in media and technology-based initiatives that can be used by governments, organisations and communities.



Box 2 Bridging the digital divide

COLME's activities are based on an underlying theme: give local people the skills to create and deliver the message. There are many benefits to training local experts. Most importantly, they know what's important in their community and how to communicate effectively. Their productions address cultural and linguistic issues. And by gaining valuable skills, these people become more employable. By enhancing their ability to earn a living, COLME's training empowers them and builds their self-esteem. By enabling people in developing countries to produce their own media, COLME is helping to bridge the digital divide.

NGOs with digital audio and video production technology and training, empowering them to create content that includes appropriate health information. Since the content is created locally, it is in the linguistic and cultural context of the targeted group. From its vast resources, WHO provides specialised health information to the NGOs.

The training is delivered in the form of radio, television and village cinema events where a generator powers a projector that shows DVDs that the NGO has created concerning health issues in the form of skits and dramas. These forms of delivery reach far more people than a live performance would. And the use of visual and oral communication overcomes the barriers of illiteracy.

The key to success is relevance at the local level. People in the communities know the problems and how to address them. We give them the tools, training and know-how so they can create radio or TV programmes or videos with local content, in their own language that will relate to their life.

In the past three years, COL has worked with the WHO and NGOs in The Gambia, India, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone, the Solomon Islands, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland and the United Republic of Tanzania to develop media programmes that address health issues. It has also worked with the WHO-affiliated Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in Barbados and Guyana on health initiatives.

Media empowerment and HIV/AIDS

Much of COL's media empowerment work centres on reducing the stigma of HIV/AIDS and educating people about how to prevent transmission of the disease. One of COLME's first initiatives was working with staff of the Nova Scotia Gambia Association (NSGA), an NGO based in Canada and The Gambia, where COL provided technology and training to enable NSGA to document and deliver its work in peer health education. The group had been putting on performances about HIV/AIDS issues primarily to school groups. By recording these performances on video, the NSGA vastly expanded the audience it could reach. People view Gambian skits and discussions concerning HIV/AIDS in a localised context. It is relevant and powerful.

Through village cinema events, the NSGA videos have now reached the entire secondary school sector and over half a

million people, over half of the country's population. Most importantly, statistics demonstrate a reduction of HIV infection rates in The Gambia.

The success of the Gambian initiative encouraged the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to provide funding to replicate the peer health education project in Sierra Leone. That project, initiated in 2004, is using similar peer health training on video to reach all districts of the country. It is also using professional footballers in an initiative aimed at educating truck drivers about HIV/AIDS prevention and stigma.

In South Africa, COL has worked with Valley Trust, an NGO in KwaZulu-Natal, to disseminate localised HIV/AIDS stigma information to rural areas using video and audio productions. COLME conducted training for Valley Trust workers to teach them to create and edit video material. They created videos that are being used for training of health care workers. Valley Trust's major activity and source of income is training community health care workers. They can now streamline how they train people with higher quality training and video-based demonstrations to accompany print materials.

Valley Trust has also built partnerships with local media outlets to use their videos for advocacy and educational purposes. The videos have promoted greater understanding among target groups in the rural sector of KwaZulu-Natal about the effects of stigma related to HIV/AIDS, and the care and well being of people living with HIV/AIDS. A further benefit is that Valley Trust can use the photos and videos to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work and attract funding from the international community.

Combating malaria

In Sri Lanka, COL employed its ODL expertise to aid Sarvodaya, a local NGO, to establish a Health Media Unit to produce information about malaria. The information created by Sarvodaya has been delivered via radio, television and mobile units travelling with projector and generator to villages. This model was particularly effective in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami. Working with WHO, Sarvodaya used their training and technology to deliver water- and food-safe information to the affected eastern shore including Tamil-held territory.

In the Solomon Islands, COL has worked with Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT), a local NGO, to address both malaria and HIV/AIDS. Rates of malaria in the Solomon Islands are among the highest in the world. COL provided SIDT members with training in video production, enabling them to create health awareness videos that are delivered to isolated groups in rural areas using village cinema – a data projector, screen, gas generator and DVD player.

Enhancing agriculture and environment

COLME's activities in the Caribbean have addressed agribusiness opportunities and environmental sustainability issues by delivering training and information from scientist to extension officer to farmer. Countries and key players within each ministry were selected in consultation with the regional office of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). This focus on

agribusiness opportunities and environment has aided governments in the region in their efforts to move towards crop diversification (i.e., away from single-crop dependency such as bananas in Dominica or sugar in St. Kitts and Nevis) among small-plot farmers who have been sidelined by mass-produced food products from developed countries.

Agricultural extension officers in the region have been taught camera and video production skills at the rural extension units to gather information on the local agricultural issues. The work has also updated Ministry of Agriculture media units with digital technology and training to aid in the two-way flow of information among farmers, extension officers and scientists. This in turn allows content to be localised in consideration of the conditions of the Parish (state) or region of the island.

Currently COLME agricultural activities are underway in Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis and Trinidad and Tobago.

Developing capacity in TVET

COLME's activities are part of a Pacific regional Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) initiative in institutional capacity development undertaken by COL and sanctioned by the Ministers of Education in the region with in-country polytechnics and technical institutes. The activities have added value to the course development work at the polytechnics and have enabled the institutions to advocate technical vocational training as a career choice among young people or those wishing to upgrade skill sets. These video and audio productions are distributed via radio, television, workshops and field days to reach farmers.

COLME's technical vocational work has been undertaken in Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa and Vanuatu.

Radio for community development

COLME's community development activities demonstrate the effectiveness of transmitting information on a low-cost suitcase FM radio at the rural community level. The main thrust of the radio-based activities is to target rural disadvantaged groups addressing issues related to health, basic education and gender.

The activities are also a vehicle to serve the role for advocacy of rural community radio as an effective means of addressing the Education for All targets.

Besides the technical aspects of operating and maintaining the technology, business skills are also taught that would aid in long-term sustainability of the rural FM stations. The FM stations are a means for governments and funders to consider firsthand the effectiveness of community radio in a low-cost sustainable model. It is also an opportunity for policy makers within the government to observe, within the cultural, linguistic and infrastructural issues of the rural areas of their countries, the opportunities that community radio could present for a nation.

COL has been active in developing and promoting community radio in Cameroon, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Uganda.

The benefits of building capacity

COL's Media Empowerment programme has had a profound impact on people in developing countries in a number of ways. On a large scale, millions of people have had access to relevant, effective communication about health issues that could literally save their life. At the NGO level, COL's involvement helps organisations to do their work more effectively, which in turn attracts outside funders (such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the case of the NSGA).

At the individual level, COL is creating empowerment, self-esteem and employment. People gain skills and sustainable employment. Trainees have additional entrepreneurial opportunities due to their exposure to digital video/audio techniques. By developing local media experts, COL is helping to bridge the digital divide.



Biographical notes

David Walker is Education Specialist in Educational Technology at the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) where he is responsible for their educational and technology initiatives across all countries served by COL.