What makes for productive partnerships?
Lessons learned from COL-Commonwealth-Microsoft in the Caribbean

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Genuine partnerships contribute to the planning, implementation, managing and evaluating of basic education programmes

(World Declaration on Education for All, 1990:7)

Introduction

Improving access and quality in education is a huge task – it is too big for any single institution/agency and too complex to be left to one perspective only (World Bank, 2000). Governments, development agencies and the private sector recognise the growing importance of partnerships in their development strategies and have pointed to partnerships as the road to success.

Not much literature is available on the workings of partnerships in educational development assistance. Reports on partnerships usually contain the results of a programme and do not include the opportunities and constraints that the practice of partnership generates. The purpose of this article is to report on a partnership between the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the Commonwealth Secretariat and Microsoft in ICT in Education in three Caribbean countries, and outlines what we have learned from the partnership.

The ICT in Education challenge in the Caribbean

Commonwealth Caribbean countries, with the exception of Guyana and Belize, are all islands. In the context of ICT, these countries are all challenged by high communication, energy and transport costs, irregular international transport volumes, disproportionately expensive public administration and infrastructure due to their small size, and all have little or no opportunity to create economies of scale. Many of these countries are ecologically fragile, which has over the years resulted in the loss of life and caused significant damage to economic infrastructure. However, they also share a higher level of socio-economic status, if UN and World Bank indicators are taken into account, and have relatively high levels of human development, according to the UN’s classification system. Governments have recognised the huge potential of ICT to empower people to meet developmental challenges and strengthen the economy. Several ICT in Education policy and implementation initiatives are recorded in Caribbean countries. ICT in Education is not a new area of work but there is a need to consolidate the different efforts and projects into coordinated, planned and sustained implementation initiatives, led by governments.

The Commonwealth Secretariat was called upon by several governments in the Caribbean to assist them in the policy development and implementation of ICT in Education. The Secretariat, acknowledging the ICT in Education challenges in the Caribbean and the contribution that other partners can make, invited COL and Microsoft to jointly explore the opportunity of collaboration in the Caribbean, starting in Guyana.

The case of Guyana

The Government of Guyana has outlined various policies that are aimed at creating an environment that will foster technology use and encourage investment in ICT, with the education sector being one of the most critical areas. This is because narrowing the digital gap is more than just providing physical access to computers and the internet; people must understand how to put ICT to good use. There is an agreement in Guyana that the integration of ICT into the learning and teaching process through teacher training and professional development will become the backbone to creating a knowledge society.

In 2009, a mission to Guyana led by the Commonwealth Secretariat identified the need to localise an international ICT in Education Framework for Guyana and to create an enabling environment for the implementation of ICT in Education. Under the visionary leadership of the Minister of Education, the Honourable Minister Baksh, the findings of the mission were supported and an agreement was reached on strategic partnerships between the ministry and selected public and private sector partners. The ministry entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Commonwealth Secretariat, COL and Microsoft. A partnership was formed with the ministry as the primary or implementing partner and the Commonwealth Secretariat, COL and Microsoft as secondary partners.

The UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers (CFT) was adopted as the implementation framework in Guyana. A partnership agreement specified the aims and objectives, the range of stakeholders that could be engaged, commissioning and management arrangements, methods for sharing information, as well as a monitoring and evaluation framework for both the partnership and the service. It also defined local operational partners, such as the National Centre for Educational Resource Development within the ministry, the Cyril Potter College of Education, the University of Guyana, the Ministry of Finance and the Directorate of Telecommunications within the Office of the President, to name a few.

The Ministry of Education also acknowledged that other partners could be identified and partnerships formed based on local needs and contexts. Significant time went into developing the operational partnerships that focused on more practical aspects such as common procedures, protocols and systems for sharing information, joint training opportunities, and arrangements for monitoring and evaluation.
As a result of the partnership between the Ministry of Education, the Commonwealth Secretariat, COL and Microsoft, a ‘Professional Development Strategy for Teachers in Guyana’ was established to provide a comprehensive framework and three-year pathway for Ministry of Education officials, school principals, administrators and teachers to become competent in harnessing ICT to support high quality teaching and learning.

A start-up plan was also developed to identify the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved. The guiding principle of the plan was to ‘Think big, start small and scale fast’ – in other words, start to gain experience and demonstrate tangible benefits, then accelerate the implementation of deliverables in the plan. Each partner brought to the partnership their strengths, accompanied by tangible commitments and resources that resulted in a coherent and consolidated implementation.

The Ministry of Education also formed other partnerships; with the World Bank it launched a project for the restructuring of the Cyril Potter College of Education and the University of Guyana’s Faculty of Education and Humanities. The decision was taken that the UNESCO CFT would also form the basis for all ICT courses offered by the two institutions and that they would be aligned with what was offered at the ministry.

The COL-Commonwealth Secretariat-Microsoft partnership has also continued its efforts into two other Caribbean countries and started to work in The Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago. In April 2011, the partnership was extended to 18 Caribbean countries and territories. Although many lessons have been learned from the implementation in Guyana, it is important to recognise the different needs and context of each country, and that implementation of a partnership in each country is unique, based on the country’s vision, plans and environment.

Productive partnerships

No matter how well intended and designed a partnership arrangement is, it is affected by both individual and organisational levels. Partners plan and implement a jointly agreed programme with committed individuals and resources, share relevant information, and pool risks and rewards. Partnerships and integrated working require a culture of shared ownership and common working arrangements across organisational and professional boundaries, yet must remain very clear on the strengths that each partner brings to the partnership.

In the case of the COL-Commonwealth Secretariat-Microsoft partnership, the strengths that each partner has brought to the partnership can be summarised as follows:

1. The **Commonwealth Secretariat** is the lead secondary partner in the partnership, bringing a wealth of regional and in-country understanding, experience and expertise of the government, telecommunications, and regulatory environment and implementation at policy level. It also provides technical assistance, advice, policy development and support.

2. **COL** focuses on increasing digital literacy in institutions and communities. It provides ICT in Education policy support to governments and prepares teachers for ICT integration into teaching and learning. It also assists institutions in the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) in teaching and learning; this is done through advocacy, materials development, capacity-building, professional development, policy support, development of models and research.

3. **Microsoft** contributes its strategic leadership in education, programmes and support in the form of:
   - **Innovative schools**: providing schools, governments and partners with resources, training, expertise and technology blueprints that help schools to better prepare students for life and work in the twenty-first century.
   - **Innovative teachers**: providing teachers with tools, forums and resources that build communities of practice, support collaboration and access to quality content, and challenge educators to integrate ICT into teaching and learning in a meaningful way.
   - **Innovative students (learners)**: empowering learners to use ICT in their schoolwork and learning.

Collectively, the partnership agreed to focus on teacher development in ICT and implemented this through: information and knowledge delivery; in-country and institutional policy review and support; collaborative materials development and capacity-building; and competency measurement and certification. Schools in all 18 countries and territories also have access to low-cost Microsoft software through individual Microsoft School Agreements, and learners are able to access free email addresses through Microsoft’s Live@edu, a suite of online hosted services designed for and offered free of charge to educational institutions. This part of the agreement is managed by the local Microsoft Trinidad and Tobago office.

The partners have also identified other areas of joint collaboration, including: providing advocacy and policy support to governments, universities and teacher training institutions in the Caribbean region to promote integration of ICT into teaching and learning; developing the programme for other Commonwealth countries; increasing access to education through the use of ICT for people in underserved regions of the Commonwealth, including the provision of OERs; and promoting and facilitating online communities to share expertise and good practice.

Lessons learned

Recognising the uniqueness of each partnership formed, the following lessons have been learned from the above experience.

- The primary partner is the country/ies in which the partnership is operating. Any partnership has to be embedded within and driven from the vision and strategies of the primary partner, with shared ownership of the partnership by all partners. The success of the implementation of the partnership relies on clear and effective leadership from the side of the primary partner – the in-country ‘champion’ driving the initiative and being the ‘face’ of the initiative. In Guyana, the effective and continued leadership of the Minister of Education was and still is crucial.

- A partnership can only work if all partners agree to and practise key principles. These include:
– Valuing the vision and direction from the host countries.
– Agreeing on and understanding the aim of the partnership.
– Agreeing on shared goals and values.
– Committing to openness, trust and honesty between partners.
– Communicating regularly and openly with and between partners.

- The partners have to create and work in a supportive atmosphere where suggestions, ideas and conflicts are addressed and effectively communicated, especially between the primary and secondary partner. The success of a partnership relies very heavily on consolidated and agreed messages through a consistent ‘messenger’.
- Selection of partners is key to the success of an initiative. Partners are chosen on their strengths and areas of expertise. A critical success factor is working collaboratively to recognise the different organisational cultures within the partnership. All partners have to commit dedicated time and resources to the administration and operation of the partnership. It is also important that a partnership can be terminated when a partner cannot fulfil its commitments or fails to adhere to the principles, goals and aims of the partnership.
- Very often underestimated is the time it takes to agree on the partnership details and details of the plans and actions. Furthermore, all partners need to demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to adjust as the partnership progresses.
- The life expectancy of a partnership must also be agreed upon and known to all partners, especially the primary partner. At the end of the life-cycle of a partnership, the primary partner has to take the responsibility of sustaining the outcomes of the partnership. Therefore, the value of the partnership lies in the maintenance and sustainability of the outcomes of the partnership within the context of local implementation plans.
- Finally, the monitoring and evaluation arrangements for both the partnership and the service have to be agreed on from the beginning of the planning phase, and must be resourced and sustained throughout the life-cycle of the partnership. There must also be a commitment and agreement on how to effect changes in response to monitoring recommendations.

To make a partnership work takes a lot of energy, as well as continuous commitment and effort from everyone involved. Getting everyone engaged in the work and the outcomes can be challenging, particularly in the early stages. It is also important to set clear boundaries between partners’ responsibilities, and to consolidate different partnership agreements and implementation methods in one agreed framework.

Everyone has to make a commitment to co-operate, co-ordinate and communicate for the duration of the partnership. That means that the initiative is bigger than the partnership or the individual partners. It must be the vision of the country/ies and its champion that drives the implementation and not the vision of the partnership or the individual partners. In the words of the Minister of Education in Guyana: ‘Partnerships contribute to delivering what we could not deliver on our own.’

Endnotes
3 Commonwealth Caribbean countries refers to the 12 Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean and include Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.
6 Over the next two years, the three organisations will collaborate to improve access to, and use of, ICT in primary and secondary schools at different levels in 18 Caribbean countries and territories, 12 of which are Commonwealth member states: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands.

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