

How can we use learning to support development?



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Greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning or COL. COL is an intergovernmental organisation established by Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver in 1987. We are privileged to be in beautiful British Columbia and thank our hosts the Government of Canada for making this possible. What does COL do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and technologies for expanding access to education and training. COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development and this aligns us to the global Sustainable Development Goals.

I was happy to learn that you have chosen to focus on Immigration, Migration and Refugee Issues. These are all symptoms of the uneven development, inequalities and conflict in many Commonwealth countries. If attractive opportunities for livelihoods and peace are available to our young people in their home countries, there will be less movement from the poorer to the high-income countries. How can we use learning to support development?

We have a very young Commonwealth, where 60% of the population is under the age of 30. Youth unemployment is very high globally and most governments are concerned about how to provide the relevant education and training to prepare the young people for employment and entrepreneurship. Let me share four examples of COL's work in this respect.

As you know, the Commonwealth has 31 small states. COL has facilitated the development of a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). All small states have come together to develop courses which are then available free to all the members of the consortium. The National University of Samoa offers the VUSSC developed Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture. The first group of students who graduated have all got full-time employment in their home country.

Much more needs to be done, especially for girls who are often denied access to education and forced into early marriage. This is Khadija from Bangladesh who tells us 'My father believes that only the boys should have an education, not the girls. So my father wants me to get married, but I did not want to destroy my life by getting married at an early age. I want to continue my study to become independent because I firmly believe that education can change my social position.' Thanks to a grant from Global Affairs Canada, COL is using distance learning and technology to support the schooling and skilling of girls and women.

COL employs appropriate technologies to help youth develop technical and vocational skills for livelihoods. As a result of this training, Rehana Khatun has started a poultry enterprise in Bangladesh. This enables her to contribute to her family income.

Through mobile learning, the Batwa community in the remote forests of Uganda learned scientific honey and beekeeping practices which has resulted in two meals a day for them.

I hope these examples have demonstrated the ways in which COL uses appropriate technologies to create learning opportunities for young people, particularly women and girls.

The Commonwealth is a very diverse group of nations which has people of different colours, religions and languages. And yet there is a sense of common identity, a sense of unity in diversity. This is because the Commonwealth has always promoted the values of respect and understanding. Whether we agree with a particular point of view or not, we must recognise the right of all to speak and to be heard. Let us choose the path of dialogue and discussion rather than confrontation and conflict.

During your deliberations today, please consider the value of respect and understanding in dealing with immigration, migration and refugee issues. You are our future and have a key role to play in strengthening the Commonwealth as a force for global good.

Thank you and good luck with your deliberations.