Opening Speech

Colleagues and Friends

A very warm welcome to this beautiful country where some of us are seeing sunshine after quite a while! We would like to thank the Government of St Lucia for offering to host this first regional workshop on OER. This is both appropriate and timely as St Lucia in partnership with COL, has developed a national ICT in Education policy and strategy, which includes OER. COL will continue to work with our partners here to ensure successful implementation.

The Commonwealth of Learning is also very grateful for the partnership and support of UNESCO and the Hewlett Foundation for over a decade during which two major world conferences on OER were held. These events contributed to raising global awareness about the benefits of OER and several major initiatives have emerged especially in the global south. For instance, in China and India where governments have taken the lead to promote the use of OER at scale. We are grateful to our colleagues from UNESCO, and the Hewlett Foundation for their valuable contributions and support and are pleased to welcome Policy makers from around the region and our partners Open Education Global. Thank you all for being here.

COL has been involved with OER development even before the term was first coined. In 1999, COL led the development of 46 teacher training modules by teachers in eight countries of Southern Africa and these free materials were taken up by institutions in Ghana and Nigeria. Why is COL interested in promoting OER? When COL was first established, its fundamental purpose was "assist[ing] the acquisition and delivery of teaching materials and more generally facilitating access to them; and commissioning and promoting the adaptation and development of teaching materials". This was visionary 32 years ago and is now beginning to bear fresh fruit as OER.

The OER movement is a people's movement, founded on principles that challenge the organisational values and pedagogical practices of many educational institutions that still represent closed systems. The principles of openness, sharing and collaboration that characterise the OER movement are critical to democratising education in the 21st century.

As we know, we live in a very unequal world. A poor widow in Kenya told my colleague that the worst feeling a mother could get next to hunger was the inability to buy a textbook when her child needed it for her school. In Cameroon in 2012 a dozen students in Grade 2 were sharing one textbook for reading, and fourteen students had access to only one math textbook. Using OER can certainly reduce costs and put a textbook in the hands of each child. A recent COL study on OER use in Antigua and Barbuda indicated that each student saved 64 ECD per semester per course when OER textbooks were used. Further, use of OER also improved student performance by 5.5%.

OER emerged as a technology driven solution to address issues of access, costs and quality. But for COL, OER are also based on values such as equity and inclusion, collaboration and respect for diversity.

First, equity and inclusion: Involving people at the grassroots is key to the sustainability of OER as a people's movement. Bee-keepers in the remote forests of Uganda have learnt honey-gathering techniques using OER developed by experts who communicate with them through their basic mobile phones in their dialect. Several countries have initiated specific projects to make OER accessible for people with disabilities. Much more needs to be done. As per a COL survey, Australia, Seychelles and Trinidad & Tobago have special considerations for persons with disabilities. Malawi and Swaziland indicated that they use sign language and Braille literature. Our partner the Global Rainbow Foundation is providing free braille textbooks to college students and with COL support will make them available as OER. COL has initiated the process of making its website more user friendly for the visually impaired.

Second, collaboration: More speed and scale in OER development can be achieved by working together. Participants from nineteen Commonwealth countries came together in the Maldives to develop a course on Sustainable Agriculture. They worked hard for three weeks to create a programme relevant to the needs of small states. The content, based on OER drawn from the global commons, was then adopted by the National University of Samoa, and the first cohort of graduates is already in full-time employment within the country. Not only was the programme developed in record time, it also resulted in long-term partnerships and cooperation. This was part of COL's VUSSC which is a consortium of 31 small states of the Commonwealth—with all 12 Caribbean countries on board. A transnational qualifications framework was developed as OER and has contributed to the Caribbean Qualifications Framework.

Third, respect for diversity: Linguistic and cultural diversity continue to be a challenge within the OER movement, which is predominantly in English. As a European report points out "Poor people must be able to express and communicate locally relevant knowledge in local languages if they are to shape the decisions that affect their livelihoods. Local content development is closely tied to human development, and the ultimate goal of this is the empowerment of local communities." (ENRD, 2010, p.3). Farmers in India share their knowledge and expertise freely on a website developed by them in their own language Tamil—and what's more, they release the content using a Creative Commons licence. As more stakeholders share knowledge in the vernacular, the global knowledge base is enriched and enlarged.

The world is far from achieving the targets of SDG 4. As per current trends if we are to achieve the targets by 2030, we need to cover a 9% deficit in universal primary education, 26 % in secondary education and 62% gap in tertiary education. In addition the world is facing a learning crisis. If we are to address these challenges we need creative and innovative solutions. The Commonwealth of Learning believes that knowledge is our common wealth and that OER have tremendous potential for promoting equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all. This aim will be further advanced through UNESCO's OER Recommendation adopted by all Member States. This workshop is part of the process of promoting the development, sharing and use of OER and I'm sure that collectively we can bring the benefits of OER to the remotest and most unreached of our stakeholders.