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Theme:  
Outreach & Community Engagement: Reaching the hard to reach

### **University-Community Links for Rural Prosperity**

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#### Introduction

Most universities say that the three elements of their mission are teaching, research and service to the community. If they are candid, however, most admit that the community function is usually a distant third in importance.

At the recent Asia-Pacific preparatory meeting for the 2009 World Conference of Higher Education in Macau there was little sign of greater engagement with communities except for an interest in conducting action research with them.

Most universities also claim that they contribute to national development. No doubt they do this through their teaching and research, even if some graduates then emigrate to richer countries.

We argue today that universities should do more to tackle the single most important development challenge for most poor countries, which is to improve rural prosperity.

Of the 1.1 billion people living on less than \$1 a day (one-third of whom are in the Commonwealth), three-quarters live in rural areas and rely on agriculture for both food and income. Linking universities to rural communities at the grassroots level can be an important vehicle for doing improving their lot. In Commonwealth countries it is imperative to promote agriculture for development.

The Commonwealth of Learning and its partners have developed a successful model, Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3 Farmers), which links universities and village communities in order to help farmers improve their livelihoods. The model will be explained, noting how universities are approaching the task in India and Sri Lanka.

#### Improving rural prosperity

It is easy to make a community richer by an injection of donor funds, although the improvement often stops when funding stops. Sustainable increases in the prosperity of a rural community require that the livelihoods of its members be enhanced through permanent changes in the efficiency and productivity of the value chain of the local economy.

COL and its partners studied the impact of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) kiosks in rural India and did action research in villages over a number of years to develop the L3 Farmers model. The essence of the model is to help the farming village community articulate its own vision for its development and then to bring together – from local resources – the money, information and

communications links necessary to achieve that vision. Universities can play a key role in providing the information that the farmers need and may also find significant applications for some of their own agricultural and biological research.

Applying new knowledge is the most reliable route to greater prosperity. There is an abundance of knowledge that could be useful to the millions of farmers and smallholders in the developing Commonwealth. Unfortunately it does not reach them because the traditional function of agricultural extension services has broken down in three ways.

First, it is stretched too thinly. In the part of India where COL works in there is one extension worker for every 1,500 farmers – not counting the legions of landless labourers also involved in farming. Second, extension work is often misdirected: 80% of farm work is done by women, yet women farmers receive only 5% of agricultural extension services and are under-represented in training programmes. Third – and a key issue for the L3 Farmers model – traditional extension tells farmers what to do, instead of helping the farmers achieve what they, with their local knowledge, consider to be the most promising routes to greater prosperity.

### University and Community working together

#### *Creating social learning capital in the village*

The L3Farmers model turns this around by facilitating the creation of village associations that can create their own vision for development and assume responsibility for planning, managing and monitoring their own activities. The key principle is to move away from external dependency. Creating this base of a cohesive village community that generates its own leaders is not a process that can be rushed.

COL has come to distinguish between structural social capital – meaning the formal creation of the village association – and cognitive social capital (which we sometimes call ‘social learning capital’) which designates the growth of trust and confidence that enables the village to act collectively. Creating the village association is relatively easy. Developing social learning capital, which is the key to success and sustainability, needs nurturing and training.

An important element of the farmers’ vision for the development of their village is the identification of one or two areas of farming in which improvement of practice could lead to greater prosperity.

These might be, for example, improving the quantity and quality of their milk production, switching to growing a new crop, or making the marketing of all their produce more efficient.

The identification of a process for improvement leads to a series of questions, often very simple questions. How do I tell a good milk cow from a poor one? How do I check milk quality? What is the market price for this crop in my district and further afield?

#### *Involving the universities - India*

In the state of Tamil Nadu, where COL’s Indian project is centred, these questions are put to a consortium that has been created among the local information-rich institutions, including four Tamil Nadu universities: the Open University, the Agricultural University, the Veterinary Sciences University and the University of Madras.

Interaction over the questions and answers takes place through the ICT kiosk in the village. The villagers arrange to make the information widely available, either through training sessions (e.g. for measuring milk quality) or, through a web pages, developed by the women of the village, that show the answers in graphic form (e.g. diagrams showing items on the check list for distinguishing between cattle).

So far the evidence suggests that the universities like this way of working and the experience has led some of them to develop distance learning versions of their programmes.

#### *Involving the universities – Sri Lanka*

In Sri Lanka the interaction with universities is done differently, with individual universities focusing on villages in their own region. COL helps the university partner develop a plan for its L3Farmers activity. This involves conducting a community needs analysis and documenting the profile of the farming families and the farm practices that are the basis of their livelihoods. The university and the community than agree on the learning needs, learning processes, and learning outcomes that would help the community improve its incomes and livelihoods.

The study maps out the roles and responsibilities of the university, the community and other partners, ensuring that this roadmap leads to a community-driven approach to agricultural development and an action plan for L3Farmers. This includes, as well as the social mobilisation of the community and the creation of structural and cognitive social already mentioned, the involvement of a bank and the use of an ICT learning centre.

The involvement of a bank is vital. Farmers will need funds to do new things. However, COL’s experience is that where a rural banking network exists (which is not always the case in Africa), banks are eager to increase their lending given the promise of greater farming efficiency and productivity that L3Farmers holds out.

The ICT learning centre becomes the focus for much of the learning and training that is at the heart of L3Farmers. Very importantly it also gives the community a window on the wider world and the opportunity to raise the ICT skills of members of the community, which they find very empowering.

In Sri Lanka L3 Farmers is uniquely university based and so far four national universities are implementing it in villages in their vicinity as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Pilot Initiation of L3 Farmers in Sri Lanka**

Implementing University	Village	District	Base for Livelihoods
University of Colombo – Magampura Institute of Agro-technology and Rural Sciences	Weligatte	Hambantota	Tissue culture Banana cultivation
The Open University of Sri Lanka	Ambanpola	Kurunegala	Cattle rearing
Eastern University	Kaluthavalai	Batticaloa	Vegetable cultivation
Ruhuna University	Kamburupitiya	Matara	Mushroom farming

I have visited the projects in Hambantota and Batticaloa and was most impressed. In Hambantota the University of Colombo is helping farmers change from rice paddy farming to growing sour bananas, which have a much higher value-added. The farmer shown in this slide has increased his income by a factor of six and built this house alongside the straw shack that used to be the home for his family. Furthermore, young local women with secondary education are now employed in skilled precision work on the banana tissue cultures in sterile laboratories right next to their villages.

I might note that the leader from the University of Colombo is a Professor of Biology, Kshanika Hirimburegama, who was recently appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University but has lost none of her interest in the project.

In Batticaloa, a region that is only now emerging from a period of civil strife, farmers are diversifying their vegetable crops in the direction of higher value produce such as aubergines. Their quality is the best in the country notwithstanding the fact that they have to cope with very poor sandy and salty soil.

The Vice-Chancellor of the Eastern University reports that involvement with this project has been very beneficial to the University's local image, which is particularly important given the complex politics of this region of Sri Lanka.

At the national level we are extremely fortunate to have the former Vice-Chancellor of the Open University of Sri Lanka, Professor Uma Coomaraswamy, another biologist, playing a coordinating role. She has ensured that the projects are tied into national development policies and projects, notably *gama neguma*, a national agricultural development project driven by the President's Office. She has also been able to engage the University Grants Commission and the Vice-Chancellors of the national universities in the project and given a new profile to university-community relations.

Finally, before we wrap up, one of the conclusions we drew from the success of the L3 Farmers project – in fact a conclusion that emerged in discussions here in Hyderabad at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, ICRISAT, is that we need a new breed of professional, which we call 'knowledge info-mediaries'. These are people whose training could lead them to become tele-centre operators, extension officials of a new type, teachers, or advisors to the private and public sectors. We suggest that universities should develop a learning profile for such knowledge info-mediaries and create training programmes for them.

### Conclusion

This is a very brief summary of a most exciting project that has implications well beyond the two countries that I have mentioned. My purpose in bringing it to the attention of this ACU conference is to emphasise that service to the community is not just an exercise in academic public relations, but can contribute significantly to national development and create some very effective applications of the science and technology that is being studied and researched on campus.

The L3Farmers programme has helped villages in India and Sri Lanka to achieve sustainable increases in prosperity and visible empowerment of the mostly female farmers.

One of the keys to the programme's success is that everyone wins: the farmers are richer; the banks do better business; the ICT kiosk operators make a good living; and the universities can demonstrate effective engagement with their local communities.

We end with a quotation from Professor Gamini Samaranayake, Chairman of the University Grants Commission:

“This is a unique project demonstrating how academic, government, international and non-state organisations work together to help farmers enhance their productivity. I believe this particular L3Farmers project will be an ideal example of how an entrepreneurial culture could be fostered amongst our academics. In time to come I suggest that this kind of culture should be sufficiently incorporated to the undergraduate curricula where the young graduate could be moulded to take up national responsibilities through such innovative approaches.”