

ODL for Agricultural Development and Rural Poverty Reduction: A Workshop to Explore Innovation and Best Practice in Asia

Executive Summary

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Summary

The workshop was held from 28 – 30 June 2005 in Bangkok, Thailand, with financial support from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). The workshop was organized jointly by the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, the University of Saskatchewan, and the University of the Philippines Open University.

The objectives of the workshop were:

- To present and exchange ideas regarding the application of open and distance learning strategies to the challenges of agricultural development and rural poverty reduction;
- To provide basic descriptions of institutions having innovative programs or best practices in this field;
- To develop a template for the completion of detailed case studies; and
- To develop a detailed program of work for a subsequent research project in which such case studies would be completed.

Five invited researchers wrote and delivered a background paper. Each paper was specific to one place (India, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, and the Pacific Island Countries), and (1) described the key challenges currently facing each country regarding agricultural development and rural poverty reduction, (2) indicated how ODL strategies have been and could be applied to these challenges, and (3) introduced the work of one or more institutions having innovative programs or best practices in the application of ODL strategies to these challenges.

The first day was dedicated to setting the stage for the workshop, and discussing the background papers. The second day was dedicated to the synthesis of what has been learned about the relationship between ODL and agricultural development / rural poverty reduction, and to the identification of the most promising institutional case studies that would highlight innovative and best practices in this field. The third day was dedicated to developing a template for the production of detailed case studies, and to preparing a program of work for the completion of such case studies (pending subsequent funding approval).

There were a total of twelve participants at the workshop. Five researchers contributed background papers for discussion. Three representatives of UNESCO Bangkok, and

three representatives of the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific took part. Scott McLean participated as the lead researcher for the COL project.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Preliminary research from India, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, and the Pacific Island Countries indicates that open and distance learning can be an effective component of overall strategies to address the challenges of agricultural development and rural poverty reduction.
2. The lessons learned from these countries are diverse, and require further clarification and substantiation in order to be usefully adopted in other countries and by international organizations.
3. Further research should be supported in order to more clearly demonstrate the ways and means through which open and distance learning can be effective in this area.
4. The results of such research should be widely disseminated, so that the practical challenges of agricultural development and rural poverty reduction may be more effectively pursued.