

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

A synthesis of the proceedings

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Background

“Open and Distance Learning for Agricultural Development and Rural Poverty Reduction: A Workshop to Explore Innovation and Best Practice in Asia” was held from 28 – 30 June 2005 in Bangkok, Thailand.

The workshop was financially supported by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and organized jointly by the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, the University of Saskatchewan, and the University of the Philippines Open University.

This synthesis of the proceedings summarizes the main discussions that took place during the workshop.

Objectives, program and participants

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;
- provide basic descriptions of institutions having innovative programs or best practices in this field;
- develop a template for the completion of detailed case studies; and
- develop a detailed program of work for a subsequent research project in which such case studies would be completed.

Each researcher wrote and delivered a background paper. Each paper was specific to one country, 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 program of the workshop is enclosed as an appendix to this report. The first day was dedicated to setting the stage for the workshop, and discussing the background papers (enclosed with this report). 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 (see the attached list of participants). 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. A representative from SEAMEO was scheduled to participate, but was unable to do so due to a family emergency.

Synthesis of lessons learned from the background papers

For each country and each international organization present, we discussed the following question:

- What has been learned about the relationship between open and distance learning and agricultural development/ rural poverty reduction?

The most pertinent observations from this discussion are reported here.

Lessons learned in India:

1. ODL may go beyond education to directly address health, governance and livelihood issues.
2. ODL can extend educational access.
3. ODL can enhance quality of education by fostering interactivity, flexibility and delivering education at any time, any place
4. ODL facilitates faster dissemination of agricultural and rural development research results to the grassroots.
5. ODL promotes innovative use of I&C service.
6. VSAT should be explored where direct connectivity is absent particularly in rural and remote areas.
7. Information kiosks may serve as a rural access point
8. Community polytechnic institutions should be tapped as venues for CICs.
9. Knowledge hubs should be established at the community level for capturing tacit local and indigenous knowledge and technologies.
10. Knowledge systems should adopt the local language, local content, and multimedia formats within the local context.
11. The community approach should be used in the delivery of ODL services.
12. ODL strategies should be sustainable, participatory and based on community ownership principles.

Lessons learned in Pakistan:

1. ODL may be used to address gender inequities.
2. ODL promotes income generating activities.
3. ODL may be employed in functional literacy programs.
4. Expatriates and expatriate nationals may be tapped as resource persons in ODL programs.
5. A “national talent pool” should be established and utilized.
6. Conventional media e.g. print, audio cassettes, TV and radio, remain valid channels of ODL.
7. ODL’s affordability enables access to educational opportunities.
8. ODL transcends geographical barriers.
9. ODL may be effectively used at all levels, modes and across substantive areas of education.
10. ODL may be effectively used to address cross-cutting issues such as HIV AIDS, hepatitis, malaria, and others.
11. ODL is excellent for teacher training

Lessons learned in the Philippines:

1. Radio is still the most accessible ODL medium.
2. Innovative uses of radio such as the radio forum should be further studied.
3. Private-public partnerships should be tapped in ODL projects.
4. Multisectoral Consortia should also be encouraged to implement ODL projects.
5. ODL should involve the religious sector.
6. Effective last mile linkage strategies should be explored, i.e., mLearning (use of mobile phones for market information)
7. Probably the most difficult phase in ODL is content development.

Lessons learned in Thailand:

1. ODL is an empowering tool for all aspects of development because information/knowledge brings power: rural, agricultural empowerment.
2. ODL contributes to access, equity and quality since it narrows the: educational gap between rich & poor/ urban & rural (OTOT); income-generating gap (the OTOP portal) www.thaitambon.com; gender gap; generation gap; media gap; opportunity gap; and inter-agency gap.
3. Various knowledge-based initiatives at all levels (local, national, regional, and global) can be linked through interactive ICTs.
4. ODL allows the interface of digital and conventional media.
5. ODL attracts the young, who serves as a de facto bridge between innovation and the older generation.
6. ODL facilitates the development of local content (local wisdom).
7. The Thai government has set its mandate for lifelong education in the ICT Master Plan.
8. ODL should be integrated with macro-level policies and plans on ICTs.

9. Partnerships between policy makers and local groups including NGOs and religious denominations facilitate ODL projects.

Lessons learned in the South Pacific:

1. ODL increases the chances for disadvantaged people to have access to education.
2. Agriculture education can be offered through different delivery methods.
3. ODL can also utilize existing networks of the Ministries of Agriculture to facilitate learning activity for rural people.
4. ODL offers learners greater flexibility with regard to time, place & learning environment.
5. ODL can reach communities & groups not adequately served by conventional education.
6. ODL is cost effective.
7. ODL improves the quality of education for people.
8. ODL strategies can be designed to suit the context it is going to operate in.
9. ODL initiatives should be financially sustainable.
10. ODL should engage stakeholders in the design and delivery of programs.
11. ODL should be based on sound pedagogical and administrative models.
12. ODL should have well-established network and infrastructure to conduct practical skills, laboratory experiment and field work.
13. ODL needs good mailing system.
14. ODL needs students support services and facilities.
15. Tutorials and videoconferencing can be conducted using satellite.
16. ODL provides education at different levels and different educational needs.
17. ODL promotes unity in diversity.
18. ODL needs community resources to facilitate students' learning
19. ODL requires regional cooperation.

Lessons learned by FAO-RAP:

1. ODL focuses on education for rural people
2. ODL facilitates partnerships
3. ODL is a component of ERP Flagship Program
4. ODL can benefit and contribute as partners in the ERP Flagship Program
5. ODL promotes and facilitates networks and networking
6. ODL systems and technologies bridge the rural digital divide.
7. ODL can use products and resource materials available in FAO.
8. FAO supports ODL
 - 8.1. It has developed principles and guidelines
 - 8.2. It has specific ODL related content or reference materials pertaining to food security and sustainable development
 - 8.3. It has and will continue to support ODL projects and initiatives.

Lessons learned by Unesco APEID:

1. ODL contributes to Education for All
2. The Unesco Asia Pacific Program of Educational Innovation for Development (APEID) maintains a knowledge base (ODL-KB) that may be tapped by policy makers in Asia and the Pacific, Africa, CIS and the Baltic States to improve their ODL undertakings for vulnerable groups and poverty stricken areas.
3. ODL can benefit from capacity building, information gathering & websites development initiatives of Unesco
4. Unesco Bangkok supports ODL
 - 4.1.1. It developed resource documents and Websites
 - 4.1.2. It has and will continue to support ODL projects and initiatives
 - 4.1.3. It has partnered with Asian Association of Open Universities
5. APEID maintains a network of networks to coordinate efforts on educational innovation.

Case study template

The case studies should have the following outline:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Description of research methods
- Overview of the institution
- Focus on innovation and best practice for agricultural development / rural poverty reduction
- Lessons learned / recommendations
- List of references

The introduction should contain the following elements:

- Introduction to the case study
- Objectives of the study
- What is most significant about the case?
- Overview of the case study (outline of the document)
- (Author's affiliation)

The discussion of research methods should include:

- How was the case study completed (e.g., review of existing documents, key informant interviews, focus group processes)?
- What evidence has been gathered to support the claims being made in the case study? (Including various indicators from people and products – statistics, responses from informants, field action, policy impact, impact evaluation, existing reviews)
- What documents were reviewed, who was interviewed, etc.?

The overview of the institution should include:

- Mission and mandate
- Historical overview
- Size and scope
- Range of programs and services
- Major accomplishments
- Key contemporary issues and strategic directions
- Collaborating partners

The discussion of innovation and best practice should be the focus of the case study. At the most general level, this discussion should include:

- Description of what the institution is doing related to agricultural development and rural poverty reduction.
- Explanation of what is innovative or exemplary about this activity.
- What evidence is there about the claims being made for innovative / exemplary practices, policies, and so forth?
- What are the sectors (e.g., agriculture, health, education) and themes (e.g., gender, poverty reduction, environment, governance) involved in the case study?
- This will help the reader understand the focus of each case study, and help the researcher focus his/her research.

Innovation and best practice can be reflected in many “things” including programs, initiatives, structures, policies, systems, strategies, curricula, delivery systems, HRD processes. Whatever the substantive focus of each case study, a number of questions can be posed to consider why this constitutes innovation or exemplary practice:

- Why was the initiative undertaken?
- How was the initiative sensitive to the local / regional context?
- Did the initiative make use of existing infrastructure?
- Were the costs of the initiative sustainable?
- How were stakeholders engaged in participatory processes (e.g. planning, funding, implementation, and evaluation)?
- Were innovative or exemplary pedagogical or administrative practices used?
- What challenges and problems have been identified? How were these resolved?

The discussion of lessons learned and recommendations should include:

- What are the key lessons learned from this case study?
- How could other institutions learn from such lessons – what is generalizable to other contexts, and to what extent?
- (***For synthesis, not case studies***) What are the distinct advantages of having undertaken this research with the sponsorship of international agencies / ngos (e.g., neutrality, resources, legitimacy, comparative focus, benchmarks)?

- What are the policy implications or key principles from the study?
- State any recommendations (grounded in the study and evidence presented).
- What are the remaining questions or issues for further research?

A list of references should be provided. This list should include any reports and publications cited, and any interviews or other direct original research undertaken. In short, the list of references should provide all documentation required to enable the reader to see how this case study was related to the work / ideas of others.