Asha Singh Kanwar (Prof)  
President & CEO  
Commonwealth of Learning  
Canada  

Professor Asha Singh Kanwar became President and Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) on 1 June 2012. She has served COL for nine years, first as an Education Specialist – Higher Education and Policy and then as its Vice-President for six years.

Before joining COL, Professor Kanwar was a consultant in Open and Distance learning at UNESCO’s Regional Office for Education in Africa (BREDA) in Dakar, Senegal.

Professor Kanwar’s engagement with distance education began when she joined the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) where she served as Professor, Director of the School of Humanities and Pro-Vice Chancellor. Professor Kanwar has over 30 years of experience in teaching, research and administration.

A recipient of several awards and fellowships, Professor Kanwar brings with her the experience of having studied and worked in different contexts, both developing and developed. She received her undergraduate, Master’s and MPhil degrees from the Panjab University in India and a DPhil from the University of Sussex. She was a Fulbright Fellow for post-doctoral research at Iowa State University, where she was later invited to teach. Professor Kanwar received the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) Prize of Excellence in 2009.

At the beginning of the decade, the Human Development Report sounded a cautionary note for the Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) sector, when it argued that “the belief that there is a technological silver bullet that can “solve” illiteracy, ill health or economic failure reflects scant understanding of real poverty” (UNDP 2011:iii). During the meeting of the UN General Assembly in 2002, the Indian Ambassador affirmed that ICT by itself cannot solve the problems of poverty and under-development (Nambiar 2012). Unwin points out that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) “have the potential to
increase equality or to reduce them, depending on the social, political and economic contexts within which they are introduced” (Unwin 2009:7).

The Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) approach of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) perceives that Open and Distance Learning with the support of ICT has the potential to add value to the development process in agriculture. The experiences of COL show that ICT by itself cannot address the challenges in agriculture unless there is a paradigm shift in the concept and practices of extension itself. COL’s initiatives in Kenya and Uganda demonstrate that ICT has to be placed in the context of social and economic value chains such as social capital and financial capital, to be fully effective. Facilitating the self-directed learning among the farming community and strengthening community knowledge management through the vertical and horizontal transfer of knowledge are some of the aspects of the paradigm shift required. Through such a framework ICT enables the strengthening of human capital and adds value to the process of enhancing the food security and empowerment of marginalized groups, especially women.