Lifelong learning
policy recommendations for the future

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The Netherlands has a knowledge-based economy with a tradition of training professionals in low- and middle-income countries. Issues relating to healthy food and living conditions are playing an increasingly important role. Capacity development of professionals in these areas now calls for more than a one-off course in the Netherlands. The coronavirus pandemic has reinforced the trend towards blended learning, learning pathways that take place in both face-to-face settings and online.

Experts at Wageningen University & Research (WUR) see tremendous opportunities for blended learning as part of lifelong learning. However, responding to these opportunities calls for new forms of funding to support capacity development. As well as the existing funding of scholarship programmes, tailor-made courses and institutional partnerships, funding is needed to create blended learning pathways.

In this paper, experts at the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (WCDI), which is part of WUR, share backgrounds, trends and suggestions as a springboard for discussion about future-proof Dutch government support for capacity development in low- and middle-income countries. The aim is to continue to play a role in this field internationally and to deliver maximum impact on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) using available public funds.

### Why knowledge-building is so important for the Netherlands

- The Netherlands is a knowledge-based country, with knowledge as a major export product.
- Knowledge also has a diplomatic function. It is important for people in international positions (e.g. at the UN or at climate and food summits) to understand how the Netherlands thinks.
- The Netherlands can work in knowledge networks with well-trained people from abroad on global problems relating to issues such as climate, food and young people, as well as in cooperation with Dutch industry.
Lifelong learning: policy recommendations for the future
Changes in capacity development: ‘lifelong learning’
The context in which professionals in low- and middle-income countries work is changing rapidly. Knowledge soon becomes obsolete as new insights follow one another quickly. This means that capacity development has to involve more than a one-off course or training programme. What’s needed is a continuous process of learning, ‘lifelong learning’.

In recent years, a growing number of online knowledge offerings including many free courses have been offered worldwide. But free courses don’t necessarily lead to capacity development or to changes in the domain of healthy food and living conditions. For that to happen, professionals need to be guided to put what they have learned into practice. And increasingly, professionals need to be trained as intermediaries of knowledge and skills who can pass on their knowledge to others. Learning groups also need to become more inclusive and include young people, women and disadvantaged groups. There is a trend towards more equal collaboration between professionals in the global south and in the north. Whereas there used to be one-way traffic from sender to receiver, it is now recognised that both parties benefit from a more equal exchange.

Opportunities and limitations of online learning
All these trends have sparked a change in the nature of the work of knowledge institutes which, like Wageningen University & Research, work with professionals from low- and middle-income countries. The coronavirus pandemic has simply accelerated these changes: online learning proved to be a valuable addition, and is here to stay. While face-to-face education can never be replaced entirely, the pandemic has been a game changer in the appreciation of online learning.

With thousands of people able to access MOOCs (massive online open courses), online learning offers an opportunity to reach many more professionals than face-to-face learning. Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation primarily develops facilitated online courses and training programmes for projects and programmes. Participants in these online courses are able to try out their newly acquired knowledge more quickly in their day-to-day work. Online learning also offers new opportunities for the delivery of refresher courses and tailor-made courses to alumni, without them having to travel to the Netherlands. Online platforms allow the network function of capacity development to be strengthened and monitored.

But there are also major limitations in the online interaction between professionals and trainers. There is an enormous added value in field visits, face-to-face interaction with companies and project members, and the building of trust between participants. In a face-to-face meeting, it is easier to work together to find solutions to complex problems, and group-forming is more robust in person than online. That is why finding the most effective mix of online and face-to-face learning is key to learning paths of the future.
Blended learning is here to stay
Blended learning isn’t just about a smart mix of online, offline and face-to-face learning. It also combines individual learning, group learning or one-on-one encounters, while integrating different methods and techniques, channels and media. It also means a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning as not all learning has to take place at the same time and with everyone together. For example, participants can be sent a manual to read, or can watch an online video or lecture. They can then follow this up with a discussion of particular propositions in a face-to-face group, or they can test solutions, complete assignments in groups or go on a field visit. The most optimal form of blended learning will depend on the participants, the context and the learning question.

The key conditions and expectations for blended learning
- In low- and middle-income countries, titles and certificates are even more important for career success than in the Netherlands. A valid certificate from a reputable institution really matters.
- In some countries, the limited availability of fast, affordable and reliable internet with sufficient bandwidth remains a major obstacle. For people in those countries, it is vital that learning tools and platforms are designed with limited bandwidth in mind.
- For the same reason, it is important to ensure that some programme components are asynchronous, for example, in the form of independent study materials and videos that can be downloaded.
- Cleverly designed virtual learning options offer educational opportunities to people for whom travel has always been problematic, such as women who are not permitted to travel or groups who find it more difficult to obtain travel visas.

New modular learning pathways
There are several ways to design capacity development in the future. Lifelong learning will increasingly involve longer learning pathways, which can start with a basic course and then be expanded with different modules. These modules, the building blocks of a learning pathway, can cover topics by combining (interactive) videos, case studies plus assignment, interactive scenarios, serious gaming, or (virtual) visits to a company. They can be offered separately and in combination with face-to-face training. In this way, the modules are like beads that are strung together to create different learning pathways, depending on the learning question. Individuals who take different modules as part of a learning pathway can earn credits that add up to a certificate.

Individual, group, organisation or sector level
Capacity development can take place at the individual, group, organisation or even sector level. Every form of learning has its advantages and disadvantages. Learning in the context of a group, organisation or project often takes longer, while intensive supervision and on-the-job coaching can increase the impact of learning. Learning from individuals in a culturally and professionally diverse group enriches the learning environment. Current trends have motivated the accelerated development of online and blended learning and have blurred the boundaries between individual and group learning. That’s why it is important to develop learning products that can be used in multiple forms of learning.

Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation combines applied research, consultancy and the facilitation of multi-stakeholder cooperation in programmes and projects with capacity development in trainings and courses. Experiences gained in programmes and projects are reflected in training and courses, and in turn the feedback from training and courses is brought back into the programmes and projects. With more flexible design of learning pathways with a greater focus on blended learning, this synergy will be increased, and provide valuable building blocks for lifelong learning. This will increase the impact of capacity development on changes in the areas of healthy food and living conditions.
Lifelong learning: policy recommendations for the future
Smart policy for lifelong learning
The learning pathways of the future for lifelong learning will be blended and modular. This calls for a flexible capacity development model in which online learning activities and tools can be used in the most effective way and are suitable for different learning pathways. In developing these modules, Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation focusses on its expertise and services in food system transformation, sector transformation, multi-stakeholder processes and monitoring and evaluation, as well as on its skills in facilitating group processes, learning processes and team building.

Wageningen University & Research is already working on this strategy, with Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation working closely with others within WUR. But developing these modules is expensive. Changes are needed to the way capacity development is funded if we want to continue this development and seize opportunities.

The ongoing funding of individual scholarships continues to be necessary to enable participants from low- and middle-income countries to benefit from Dutch knowledge and insights, and apply that knowledge in their work environment. Resources should also be available for on-the-job coaching and mentoring, which can be offered as a module within a learning pathway. Professionals place a high value on this: it boosts the practical application and impact of what they have learned and strengthens the connection between professionals in low- and middle-income countries and Dutch knowledge institutions.

It is also important to make funding available for the development of high-quality modules that can be used in a variety of learning pathways. In the short term, this will require a larger investment, with a more flexible system of capacity development in the longer term. This will make it cheaper and easier to deliver tailor-made solutions for specific target groups and to respond to new market demands.

It is important to also make resources available for capacity development within partnerships, through developing learning communities or sector platforms. For example, there can be learning communities in sectors such as seeds, horticulture, dairy farming or fish farming. This can be done in specific regional focus countries, as well as in global learning communities involved in transforming the food system. Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation can develop the modules, platforms, websites and communication tools and can build and maintain online communities.
Conclusion: there are opportunities now for capacity development
A new funding model for capacity development in low- and middle-income countries with lifelong learning at the centre - acknowledging that learning pathways span months and years rather than just a few weeks- is important. The new model should also recognise that individual and group learning in the future will increasingly be offered through blended learning pathways. Funding mechanisms will have to adapt accordingly.

With these suggestions for a focus on lifelong learning through blended learning pathways, public funds can be used differently. It potentially can achieve greater impact with the same resources – not only because more people are being reached, but because capacity development is of higher quality and is more aligned with practice.

Capacity development makes a major contribution to sector and food system transformation and plays a key role in the contributions of private sector, knowledge institutions, governments and NGOs in low- and middle-income countries to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). During the coronavirus pandemic, a wealth of experience has been gained with online learning as part of blended learning. Building on these experiences offers immense opportunities. Now is the time to invest in accelerating the development of lifelong learning.
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