

“Civil Society as Partners in Commonwealth Education”

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Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, - perhaps I could say “all feathers in the eagle”, a phrase I learnt in South Africa recently. Maybe for this audience it should be all feathers in the owl, given the education focus!

This is an exciting year for the Commonwealth, not least in education. We have just had a successful meeting of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Cape Town. We are looking forward to a meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government in Kampala, together with the associated Commonwealth People’s Forum and Commonwealth Youth Forum. We are approaching that time when a new Secretary-General will be elected, wanting no doubt to build on past achievements by establishing some new priorities for the Commonwealth. This is a good time for us to promote headline issues for the Commonwealth’s education networks and programmes.

From the outset let me tell you which areas I am going to touch on:

- The continuing challenge of Education for All
- The importance of science and technology education
- Education in a changing world environment
- School links, exchanges and scholarships
- Education and awareness about the Commonwealth itself

Turning first of all to the vexed question of access to education, the Commonwealth Education Ministers called for a combined effort by government, partners in civil society and the private sector to meet the targets of Education For All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. They (and I quote):

“directed Commonwealth education organisations to target and support on a priority basis member countries that are at risk of not achieving the education MDGs”. How should we interpret this call to action?

Firstly, universal and equal access for boys and girls to primary education is not just a development goal – it’s a fundamental human right. Investing in its implementation has been shown to lower infant and child mortality rates, reduce maternal mortality rates, protect against HIV/AIDS infection and increase earning power, as well as creating intergenerational education benefits. Where people are educated, they are better placed to participate in development decisions and make informed choices about issues that affect their community.

In 2000 the world committed itself to the Millennium Development Goal of putting all children through primary school by 2015. The clock is ticking; this date means they must be in primary school by the end of 2007 at the latest. Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon warned Education Ministers in Cape Town that of UNESCO's estimate of 77 million children out of school globally, more than a third are from Commonwealth countries (27 million in 41 countries).

Many of the children out of school in the Commonwealth are girls. The Millennium Development Goals sought to ensure equal numbers of boys and girls in primary and secondary school by 2005. The deadline came and went, and 94 countries missed it. Had that target been hit, another 14 million girls would be in school right now, most of them in the Commonwealth. (6 million of them in India and Pakistan, and 4 million in Africa).

The Secretary-General has reminded us that since then, the world has made advances – some of them huge, and some of them in the Commonwealth, especially in places like Bangladesh, India, Tanzania and Uganda.

But the world is still failing to meet these Goals. At the end of 2006, Commonwealth countries like Ghana, Pakistan, Nigeria, The Gambia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and the Solomon Islands are missing their targets, with only between 6 and 8 out of 10 of their children in primary school. We cannot sit by and let this happen, and Education For All must continue to be at the heart of Commonwealth policies and priorities.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Commonwealth Foundation strongly believes that civil society organisations have an important role to play in increasing access to education, particularly in the realisation of gender equality, not least by lobbying governments and international organisations to fulfil their commitments.

Some civil society organisations across the Commonwealth have effectively pointed out the limitations of state management of the education sector and are engaged in championing the rights of girls in education. A real example is BRAC: the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee. It's an NGO, or perhaps in today's parlance a social entrepreneur, which now employs more than 97,000 people, runs 34,000 primary schools and teaches 11% of primary school children in Bangladesh, 65% of these being girls. Their successful model is now being rolled out in other countries, such as Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

The Commonwealth Foundation will shortly publish a booklet focusing on the issue of girls' education in the Commonwealth through the eyes of civil society. This publication will inform Education Ministers about the current status, challenges and progress made in the area of girls' education by civil society. It will also serve as a lobbying tool for civil society organisations in taking forward related initiatives.

Ladies and gentlemen, the theme of the Kampala CHOGM will be 'Transforming Commonwealth societies to achieve political, economic and human development'. How can this be done? There are many possible answers to this question, but I believe that at the heart of every thriving economy are three

things, access to capital, access to markets, and a community of innovative and creative entrepreneurs. Fostering creativity and entrepreneurship is an essential and long-term objective for education.

At the heart of almost all innovation lies science and technology, and this is why science and technology must be at the forefront of our educational ambitions. I am in good company in believing this. In 2003 G8 leaders endorsed an action plan for science and technology in development. In 2005 the Commission for Africa called for investment in higher education and centres of excellence, and then in 2006 the African Union adopted a ten-year plan of action for reform of science and technology teaching at all levels of African education. In January this year the African Union adopted the Addis Ababa Declaration on Science, Technology and Scientific Research for Development, committing to encourage more African youth to take up science studies, to strengthening African universities in this regard, and to promoting partnerships and funding. They called on multilateral organisations to help them, and I believe the Commonwealth should respond.

I put it to you that the Commonwealth is extraordinarily well placed to support such an endeavour. We need to strengthen and mobilise our own networks in this sector, from the Association of Commonwealth Universities to the Commonwealth Association of Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators. We need to give greater support to specialist institutions. This is why the Commonwealth Foundation has partnered with Uganda's Mbarara University for Science and Technology and the ACU to organise a conference on "Science, Technology and Innovation: Key Drivers for Socio-Economic Transformation" to be held at Mbarara, 3-5 September 2007. We already have the support of the British Council and the Royal Society for Chemistry, allowing us to bring speakers in from Tanzania and Kenya, as well as Commonwealth applicant Rwanda. Outcomes from this meeting will feed into a workshop on "Knowledge and Innovation for Development" scheduled for the Commonwealth Peoples' Forum, which has the overall theme of "Realising Peoples' Potential". In due course we hope to raise the political support needed to bring this important matter to the attention of our Heads of Government, and to persuade them to develop and support a Commonwealth initiative in science and technology for innovation.

I am not asking for the Commonwealth Science Council to be reinstated; clearly it was felt that it did not meet the needs of the Commonwealth. What is needed now is a cross-cutting, multi-stakeholder initiative between civil society, academia, the private and business sectors, to achieve clearly defined aims. The first of those aims should be strengthening science and technology education in Commonwealth schools and universities.

Ladies and gentlemen, some of you may be surprised to learn that as long ago as 1987 CHOGM asked for a report on the subject of climate change. In 1989 an excellent study was published, the subject was highlighted in the Queen's Commonwealth Day message, and the subject was promptly forgotten. If we had done more at the time, our Commonwealth citizens might not face the severe impacts of climate change that they undoubtedly do today.

The Commonwealth is uniquely vulnerable to climate change because 35 of our 53 nations are small states that are geographically or economically vulnerable to its impacts. Sea level rise, changing patterns of agriculture and fisheries, droughts, floods, typhoons and hurricanes threaten millions of Commonwealth citizens. Perhaps we are at last seeing movement amongst our governments to mitigate carbon emissions, but this must be accompanied by a major educational effort, not only in schools, but in universities and through community education channels, to teach people how to adapt to a different future. Without adoption of adaptive and defensive measures against the climate-induced disasters that will increasingly occur, lives and livelihoods will be needlessly lost.

This is why the Commonwealth Foundation recently held a conference on “Preparing for Change: Adaptive Strategies for Climate Change and Disaster Management in the Commonwealth” last October. Representatives of Commonwealth professional associations met in the Seychelles to begin the process of mobilising professionals in all walks of life. One of the strongest areas of call for action was in education, in schools, in universities and in communities. We have already begun to develop a proposal for a “Citizen’s Action Learning Guide on Climate Change” to help citizens prepare for the future.

At the Commonwealth People’s Forum in Kampala a special workshop will address the problem of “Communicating Climate Change”, and I hope the Commonwealth’s education bodies will support this debate as well as an emerging renaissance of the Commonwealth’s engagement with the problem of climate change.

Ladies and gentlemen, networks such as yours are one of the great strengths of the Commonwealth, and those strengths must be used to maximum effect, by linking schools, assisting with more exchanges of teachers and building the number of scholarships available in Commonwealth universities.

The Commonwealth Foundation was very pleased to be able to support the recent conference on schools linking at Zonnebloem in South Africa. It was a searching conference that raised quite a number of issues reiterated at a special session in the Stakeholders’ Forum of the Education Ministers’ Conference. A number of civil society organisations, such as the UK One World Linking Association and Community Link Development, have done excellent work in the past, and clearly wish to do more to bring school communities together across the Commonwealth. The challenge for the future seems to be how to achieve a greater sense of empowerment in the schools at the developing country end, and how to encourage south-south links as well as north-south ones. These issues need to be addressed. In June this year we will help to launch a “Toolkit for Linking” here in Marlborough House, to encourage linking schemes.

The Commonwealth Scholarships schemes appear to be alive and well as they progress towards their 50th anniversary in 2009. Two thousand and nine scholarships by 2009 is the target, and very likely to be achieved, not least because of the very strong support from the UK. It was a relief that Canada quickly reversed its initial decision to withdraw its scholarships. Surely all

participating countries must appreciate the importance of these schemes, not only to the students, but also to the host nation and to the world community, where exchanges, particularly between nations of different cultures and religions, play an important part in promoting tolerance and understanding, and indeed in reducing the threat of terrorism.

One aspect that I know is near to the heart of the UK Scholarships Commission is how to strengthen the bonds between scholars and the Commonwealth itself. Contact with these scholars is all too easily lost, and we need to learn from the Rhodes, Chevening and other scholarship schemes in order to build a pan-Commonwealth network of scholars (many of whom will take positions of influence) to strengthen the Commonwealth in the future. The Foundation is pleased to be cooperating closely with the Scholarships Commission in the development of a new "Friends" scheme that will give everyone an opportunity to keep up to date on the Commonwealth's achievements. Look out for the launch of the scheme at the Commonwealth Peoples' Forum in Kampala.

Ladies and gentlemen, in order for us to be effective in our work for education in the Commonwealth, we must pay attention to our own institution and its reputation across the world. The fact is that young people these days don't know what the Commonwealth is, and perhaps many don't really care either. Thanks to the hard work of the Royal Commonwealth Society and others, Commonwealth Education Ministers agreed in their most recent Action Plan to encourage education about the Commonwealth and its values in their systems of education.

I am sure other speakers will flesh out what needs to be done on the ground. We need some sort of Commonwealth curriculum, and it should be embedded in the elements on personal and social education, not in history! The Commonwealth Clubs scheme promoted by the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit is an excellent idea that needs to be multiplied up several times in order to raise awareness of what the Commonwealth stands for, and what it achieves.

There are more than 20 Commonwealth associations in the education sector, more than in any other. They come together under the banner of the Commonwealth Consortium for Education, a platform that offers good access to the Commonwealth's political work, including ministerial meetings, civil society consultations and the CHOGM. The Consortium has played an important role in the elaboration and implementation of the Edinburgh Action Plan and the recent Cape Town Action Plan.

Commonwealth Associations working in the area of education can monitor and report progress made in attaining the MDG targets in education. Their reports and findings can be used to identify policies and actions that are sustainable as well as challenges for the future. The lessons learnt can be used to develop strategies for improvement. Commonwealth Associations can also enable individuals and communities to participate in developing policies aimed at ensuring the best results from education. They are invaluable networks for spreading the Commonwealth's message, involving groups of professionals in the development process and for advocacy.

Nevertheless, having attended the 16th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers meeting in Cape Town last December, one has to ask how the work of the CAs can be taken to the next stage. And I am bold enough to ask this question because I know you are asking it yourselves! The Commonwealth Associations were certainly involved in CCEM, but on whose terms? Were there adequate opportunities for civil society voices in education to be heard? Is the arrangement between the Secretariat and civil society a true partnership on equal terms?

Whilst questioning the quality of those upward relationships, I would say that the Commonwealth education associations also need to look carefully at their links at the grass roots level. Civil society organisations draw their value and mandate from the voices of those at the grass roots whom they have the privilege to represent. If that representational role is questioned, then the strength of messages carried to higher levels will inevitably be undermined.

Clearly, Commonwealth education associations need first of all to continually build and strengthen their grass roots membership and credentials, and then to use that mandate to influence political minds and programmes in the Commonwealth Secretariat and in the countries of the Commonwealth itself.

We recognise that most CAs are run on a voluntary or part-time basis. Such limitations often contribute to vulnerability in the face of external pressures. The associations also tend to become over-dependent on the efforts of a few key activists, and on limited sources of income. There is a need for capacity building and to attract young enthusiasts. This will help to enhance the strengths of Commonwealth Associations, by improving their ability to present clear and persuasive funding proposals, reports and evaluations of work, and by helping to diversify funding sources and thereby ensure long term sustainability.

In closing let me take this opportunity to congratulate all here who are working for better education in the Commonwealth. To be sure, there is a long way to go, but with your determination and selfless commitment, a great deal can be achieved.