

THE NEXT 50 YEARS: A VISION FOR COMMONWEALTH

EDUCATION COOPERATION IN 2059

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This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Commonwealth and the fiftieth year of the birth of Commonwealth cooperation in the field of education. It is thus an opportune time to reflect on what the Commonwealth collectively in the last fifty years and to chart a way forward for the next fifty years. In order to fully appreciate the challenges of the future, we should first highlight the current global context and its implication for future education collaboration within our family of the Commonwealth.

Future Educational cooperation in the Commonwealth is likely to be influenced by global developments in many ways. The current global context is characterized by uncertainties. The turmoil in financial circles, which is creating instability in the global trading system, could lead to economic slowdown and stagnation. Terrorism, which is creating insecurity, may limit movement of people. Communicable diseases are weakening the productivity of the labour force and efforts to mitigate their impact are consuming sizeable resources. Climatic change, which is responsible for Tsunamis, floods and droughts is a threat to us all. The combination of these factors will surely test the political will in the Commonwealth in terms of genuine sharing, solidarity and commitment to cooperation.

As we celebrate the first fifty years of Cooperation in Education in the Commonwealth, it is indeed, imperative that we should reflect on the way forward. The global context highlighted above should guide

us to ask such questions as: Can we, by pooling our experience and ideas, in education and research, identify ways forward for our communities to address these big issues? Where are the main challenges and alternatives for co-operation in education in the Commonwealth? What are the ways and means for working together which are open to us in the Commonwealth? What new forms of partnership can we develop?

Given the past experiences that educational cooperation in the Commonwealth has particular value, the fifteenth Commonwealth Ministers of Education Conference of 2003 identified six Action Areas for Cooperation in the Commonwealth. These were:

- promotion of the achievement of Universal Primary Education (UPE);
- reduction of gender disparities and promotion of equity in Commonwealth Education by 2015;
- providing assistance to Commonwealth member countries at risk of not achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs);
- using distance learning to break down barriers;
- strengthening the education sector response to HIV/AIDS and addressing its impacts and;
- improving the quality of education, in particular by addressing the shortage of qualified teachers, promoting tolerance, values of democracy, human rights, citizenship, peace and good governance.

Within the context of these Action Areas the Commonwealth Secretariat devised programmes to assist member countries to address these objectives through co-operation. In Cape Town, the Commonwealth sat down in 2006, under the chair of the South African Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, and monitored the achievements in the three years following Edinburgh and earlier this week again under her guidance, the new programme since then. The Commonwealth Secretariat shall surely report to the 17th. Commonwealth Conference of Ministers of Education in Kuala Lumpur in June this year and then to the Heads of Government in Trinidad in November. I shall, therefore, not have any role to evaluate whether these Action Areas have been effectively achieved in the Commonwealth member countries through cooperation.

However, I shall share the Namibian perspective on one of the Action Areas, namely, the improvement of education quality and offer a few thoughts on the role of educational co-operation which Namibia has found particularly useful.

At independence in 1990 Namibia committed itself to promote education for all. The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, in Article 20, mandates that “all persons shall have the right to education,” and

“children shall not be allowed to leave school until they have completed their primary education or have attained the age of sixteen years”. According to **Education Statistics 2006** of the Namibian Ministry of Education, there were 557,673 learners in the formal General Education, giving a Net Enrolment Ratio of 92.5% in Grades 1-7. The Net Enrolment Ratio for females and males was 94.2 percent and 90.9 percent respectively.

While Namibia reached impressive Net Enrolment Ratios, the challenge facing the Namibian education system is the improvement of quality. **Education Statistics 2006** reported that “Grade 1 repetition rose rate rose 18 percent between 2001 to 20 percent in 2005”. The Report further noted: “High repetition rates were recorded for Grade 5 and 8”. The quality challenge in the Namibian education system necessitated the development of the **Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme** (ETSIP) that identified five strategic policy goals for the improvement of educational quality. These were:

- equitable expansion of access to post-basic education and training, with a view to increasing the supply of skills;
- improvement of education quality and effectiveness, demonstrated in increased education outcomes and outputs;
- improvement of equity in the distribution of education resources and learning outcomes;
- more efficient mobilization of resources required to finance the sector and more efficient use of these resources and
- strengthening the capacity to implement proposed reforms and to respond to the adverse impact of HIV/AIDS.

The strategic policy goals were buttressed by twenty-three actionable policy objectives. The policy objectives aimed at improving the delivery and management of Early Childhood Education Development and Pre-Primary Services; promotion of quality and effectiveness of Early Childhood Education and Pre-School; and enhancing equity of access to Early Childhood and Pre-Primary Education. Clearly, the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme recognized the importance of a strong foundation as a preparation for future learning.

Moreover, the improvement of quality in general education was to be achieved, through great efficiency in resource mobilisation and utilisation; enhancement of relevance and responsiveness of general education; and strengthening of delivery capacity and management of general education. Equity and access to Higher Education were other cardinal goals of the Programme as well as the mainstreaming of ICT in the entire education system. The programme further aimed at improving system’s response to the impact of HIV/AIDS.

Namibia is now actively implementing the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) initiative with the goals of achieving major improvement in educational quality by the year 2030. ETSIP is part of the National Vision 2030 through which Namibia strives to be a prosperous, harmonious, peaceful and politically stable nation.

The Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme will cost an additional US\$ 354 million for its implementation. Government and its Development Partners have been able to mobilize US\$ 328.8 million, leaving a gap of US\$ 31.1 million. This gap is being addressed through borrowing. Such borrowing however is at unfavourable terms given Namibia's status as a Lower Middle Income country.

Namibia's education experience might not differ substantially from that of other Commonwealth Developing countries. If Namibia is going to achieve its educational improvement goals, Namibia needs international cooperation, including Commonwealth cooperation, to succeed.

The global situation has led to decreased demand for Namibia's minerals leading to shrinking of the GDP in general and tax revenue in particular. This means that Namibia will not be able to generate sufficient domestic resources in order to meet the needs of the education sector, especially its reform efforts. Namibia looks, therefore, forward to intensify Commonwealth educational cooperation in the future.

Important areas for future educational cooperation in the Commonwealth may include:

- secondary school level text books exchange;
- institutional cooperation in capacity building and leadership development;
- the use of ICT in education;
- unhindered student mobility between the Commonwealth countries;
- professionals exchange to enhance absorption of good practices in the Commonwealth
- institutional collaboration in training and research;
- networking among educational professionals;
- collaboration in educational innovation;
- cooperation in teacher education;
- exchange of information on design of affordable physical facilities for schools and
- abolishing taxes on instructional materials in the Commonwealth.

These dimensions of educational cooperation have the potential to strengthen the Commonwealth to be able to transcend the challenges posed by global uncertainties and thereby empower Commonwealth countries to sincerely share wealth and resolve common problems in member countries. This will make the Commonwealth a really wealth sharing Commonwealth of countries that its name implies. In my view this should be the vision for Commonwealth educational cooperation to the year 2059.