

# UNESCO and the Commonwealth – our common education goals

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Both UNESCO and the Commonwealth are firmly committed to education as a human right and the key to sustainable human development. The reasons for this commitment are clear: education reduces poverty and advances development. It equips people with the knowledge and skills they need to improve their health, increase their income and expand their employment opportunities. There can be no development without education.

We are currently only five years away from the deadline for the global targets that the international community adopted a decade ago: the Education for All (EFA) goals, adopted by 164 governments, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by 189 governments, which aim to halve extreme poverty in the world by 2015. The EFA goals present a holistic vision of education throughout life, encompassing all stages and types of education, both formal and non-formal. The goals of ensuring universal primary schooling and gender equality at all levels of education are reiterated in the MDGs. However, without the individual and collective empowerment that education confers, none of the MDG targets can be reached.

## Past progress and future challenges

Great strides have undeniably been made in education in the last ten years. Over 40 million more children are in school today than at the beginning of the decade and there is more global participation in all levels of education than at any time in history. A major reason for the rise in primary school enrolments in Sub-Saharan Africa is the abolition of school fees. Ghana not only abolished school fees, but also introduced a National School Feeding Programme, recognising that children do not learn on an empty stomach. Conditional cash transfer programmes have also significantly increased access to school, for over five million children in the case of Bangladesh. Along with abolishing fees and introducing school feeding, many governments are prioritising education, increasing education spending, training more teachers, providing support to marginalised communities and running innovative youth and adult literacy programmes.

However, considerable challenges remain. Over 70 million children are still out of school, almost 30 million of them in the Commonwealth. One in six adults is illiterate. Education quality is sometimes so poor that students leave school lacking even minimal skills and competences. In addition, across the world, there are still more boys than girls getting an education – 28 countries have still to achieve gender parity. A foremost challenge is reaching the most vulnerable and marginalised groups.

We in UNESCO are proud to have signed a Cooperation Agreement with the Commonwealth Secretariat in 2009 to tackle

these challenges and advance progress towards our common education goals. The 54 Commonwealth countries represent great diversity, ranging from small island states to some of the most highly populated countries in the world. They thus offer exciting opportunities for increased knowledge sharing, exchange of best practices and capacity-building. The Agreement identifies several key areas in education that offer great potential for cooperation between both organisations, in particular:

- teacher resource development and management;
- education for sustainable development;
- HIV/AIDS and education;
- inclusive education and quality learning enhancement; and
- gender in education.

### 1. Teacher resource development and management

The current teacher shortage is dramatic – teaching staff have simply not kept pace with the unprecedented surge in primary school enrolment since 2000. Globally, 10.3 million new primary teachers will need to be recruited by 2015 to achieve universal primary education (UPE). But beyond the number-crunching there are also important qualitative challenges to face such as the training, deployment and motivation of teachers. In this regard, the Commonwealth has done remarkable work to address the issues of mobility, recruitment, retention and protection of teachers.

The Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa (TTISSA), UNESCO's response to the teacher gap in this region, aims to increase the quantity and improve the quality of its teaching force by 2015. The Commonwealth Secretariat works with TTISSA in policy development and dissemination of the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol – as well as hosting the ADEA Working Group on the Teaching Profession and conducting a study on in-service teacher education. TTISSA also works with the Commonwealth of Learning in the field of quality assurance for teacher education.

Both UNESCO and the Commonwealth are involved in the recently formed International Task Force on Teachers for EFA, a global alliance of 64 countries and approximately 18 international organisations. Hosted by UNESCO's Education Sector, the Task Force plans to address three major teacher-related gaps (policy, capacity and financing) on several fronts, including advocacy, partnerships, policy-making and national capacity-building.

Such partnerships between UNESCO and the Commonwealth and with other stakeholders aim to ensure a coherent, strategic approach to teacher issues that go to the heart of solving the current quality crisis.



## 2. Education for sustainable development

A quality education should aim to change the way we think, behave, look at the world, interact with nature, and address key societal and environmental problems such as climate change and poverty reduction. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a part of that process. It helps individuals to make decisions that meet the needs of the present without compromising those of future generations. ESD can help us to live sustainably. Governments are now realising this: according to a recent survey, 79 countries now have a national ESD coordination body.

With this in mind, UNESCO is exploring with the Commonwealth Secretariat how this latter could participate in UNESCO-led advocacy and awareness-raising initiatives. The Commonwealth is also closely involved in the ongoing processes for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Exchanges are also under way on possible joint actions on climate change education and education for respect and understanding – an essential part of sustainability.

## 3. HIV/AIDS and education

Similarly, a quality education can encourage positive attitudes and behaviour that reduce the likelihood of becoming infected with the HIV virus. With an estimated 6,800 people newly infected with HIV every day, preventive education must be at the forefront of any response to HIV and AIDS. School-based HIV education offers a very cost-effective approach to prevention as the right message can reach large numbers of young people from diverse backgrounds.

The Global Campaign for Education has estimated that UPE would prevent 700,000 new HIV infections each year.

From 2005 to 2007, the joint Commonwealth Secretariat-UNESCO Professorial Chair on HIV/AIDS & Education in Small States paved the way for joint action between our two organisations. An evaluation of the outcomes of this collaboration is currently under way. The Commonwealth Secretariat is also an active member of the UNESCO-convened UNAIDS Inter-Agency Task Team (IATT) on Education.

## 4. Inclusive education and quality learning enhancement

All countries at all stages of development have groups that are likely not to attend school, to drop out early or have learning difficulties. Inclusion must therefore be built into all education policy considerations at all levels so as to reach these groups and achieve EFA. Programmes and policies need to target the marginalised: rural populations, migrants, disadvantaged youth, out-of-school children (including street and working children), indigenous groups and other vulnerable sections of society. Bilingual education for ethnic and linguistic minorities, and more inclusive learning environments for disabled children are among programmes targeting children who are left behind. In New Zealand, the demands of the *Maori Kohanga Reo* language movement have contributed to a more multicultural education system. Flexible schooling and non-formal equivalency courses for working children have been adopted in countries like Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Pakistan.

With this in mind, UNESCO and the Commonwealth are planning to develop an easily accessible resource base that presents innovative examples of policy and practice for inclusive education.

Alongside marginalisation, education is facing a quality crisis. Millions of children are leaving school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. But how do we determine what is learnt, how and under what conditions? Appropriate monitoring, evaluation and assessment methodologies are needed, along with trained personnel to implement them. Although low-income countries are poorly covered by international learning assessments, existing evidence shows two persistent challenges: wide global inequalities in learning achievement and low absolute levels of learning. UNESCO and the Commonwealth therefore intend to cooperate on research to identify strategies for improving learning environments.

### 5. Gender in education

One-third of countries with data have still not reached gender parity in primary education, and two-thirds of the world's 759 million illiterate youth and adults are women. In many cases, girls face barriers to education ranging from household work and distance from school to gender stereotypes and negative cultural attitudes, in spite of all the evidence that investment in girls' education yields high development returns – notably increased income and better health. In some Commonwealth countries – especially in the Caribbean – boys' underachievement is a real issue.

UNESCO and the Commonwealth are currently considering how they can cooperate concretely in this area: for example, by extending existing Commonwealth initiatives into Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

## Partnerships for change

Development is a partnership. Ten years ago in Dakar, rich countries pledged that finance would be no obstacle for any country determined to achieve EFA. But aid to basic education stands at US\$4.3 billion – greatly below what is needed annually, and a far cry from the US\$16 billion needed annually to reach education-related development goals. Global partnership is needed to fill the financial gap. Meanwhile, developing countries can also do more – by making education a priority. As South African President Jacob Zuma affirmed at the FIFA World Cup Education Summit on 11 July 2010 in Pretoria, 'The most important investment in the future of any nation is education.'

Last year's Cooperation Agreement between UNESCO and the Commonwealth Secretariat indicates a commitment to partnerships, including multi-stakeholder partnerships, based on shared values that are a characteristic of both our organisations. Although a broader Memorandum of Understanding has existed between the two organisations since 1980, the recent agreement aims will enable our two organisations to work together in greater synergy towards our common education goals – and the common good, which is the true meaning of the word 'Commonwealth'.

Unless we act now by setting strategic priorities, 56 million children will still be out of school in 2015 and 700 million adults will remain illiterate. We cannot let this happen. More forceful advocacy, stronger political will, better planning and sounder policies are required to hoist education to the top of the development agenda.

By sharing information and contributing expertise to joint global advocacy and efforts in key educational areas our two organisations can – and will – accelerate progress towards Education for All.

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