

Towards and beyond global goals and targets



The 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) in Malaysia with its theme 'Towards and beyond global goals and targets' could not be happening at a more difficult and challenging time for the Commonwealth of Nations. With barely six years to go before 2015, now is a critical time not only to take stock of accomplishments in meeting the targets but also to look at the unfulfilled ambitions and aspirations as well as emerging demands and needs. It was clear from the Commonwealth Secretariat Report of 2006 that while there was cause for a modest celebration of accomplishments on the Education for All (EFA) agenda, there was also a need to re-evaluate progress, especially on issues of equity and quality, the complex reasons behind gender-related underachievement, and underperformance in some Commonwealth countries and not others.¹ In the short time remaining before 2015, the nations of the Commonwealth need to ask themselves how further progress to meet the EFA goals can indeed be accelerated and also more importantly how our collective of nations can move *beyond* those goals, through collaboration, co-operation and support.

These decisions that are to be taken also come at a time of many uncertainties in the world: the near collapse of the global financial systems towards the last quarter of 2008; the uncertainties of resources for social development purposes; the threat to adequate and affordable food supply; the consequences of climate change and other natural disasters; and the fear of reduced international development assistance. One way or another, all these developments will have an impact on the progress of realising the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and EFA goals. Achieving these targets by 2015 or beyond is not an end in itself but merely a prelude to the more important task of creating a good Commonwealth Society of fairness, equity, dignity, equality of opportunities, freedoms and respect for diversity and differences of views.

Factors impeding progress levels

This conference is an opportunity to raise these issues. Despite progress, there are shortcomings relating to education and human resource development as the Commonwealth struggles to improve the wellbeing of its citizens. Several Commonwealth countries are still trapped in a cycle of vicious poverty. Poverty is not simply a problem confronted by low income nations; it also includes many of the middle and high income countries where pockets of abject poverty amid great wealth exist. Until the last quarter of 2008, economic forecasts for the developing world were generally

optimistic. However, these forecasts were quick to warn that there were also major limiting factors with regards to an underprepared human resource (HR) base to support growth and wellbeing. Many believe that among the many difficulties impeding the progress of HR development, six stand out as extremely critical.²

- 1 The non-inclusive growth that seriously marginalises some parts of a nation or segments of society from benefiting from learning.
- 2 The quality of output from Universal Primary Education (UPE) initiatives where perhaps up to half the pupils who complete primary education revert to functional illiteracy within a short space of time. This level of underperformance undermines all of the achievements under EFA.
- 3 The transition from primary level education to that of secondary level and beyond continues to be poor, and even more worrying is the availability of secondary schools for those successfully completing primary education.
- 4 The continued shortage of skills required to support the growing needs of economies through technical and vocational education.
- 5 The gap between supply and demand in the labour market in many of the transition economies where jobs are not being created fast enough.
- 6 The perceived weakness of higher education systems in their response to demand, growth, planning and output.

When Commonwealth Ministers last met in Durban at their 16th CCEM, they were unequivocal in their declaration that 'education is a fundamental human right and integral to the democratisation and development objectives of the Commonwealth'.³ Ministers further reaffirmed their commitment to accelerate the achievement of targets of UPE, eliminate (gender) disparities in educational services, improve the quality of education and work on reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS on education. All these issues were a continuum of the targets set at the end of the 15th CCEM meeting in Edinburgh in 2003. Those principles encapsulated the Commonwealth's beliefs and values as part of our educational culture; reiterated the need for quality and innovation as a prerequisite for a progressive and increasingly innovation-dependent world; called for an expansion of access beyond primary schooling through a variety of mechanisms including the use of distance education and emerging technologies; and reminded Commonwealth countries to pay attention to governance, leadership and training of workers in education.

Commonwealth successes

The history of educational development across the Commonwealth gives Member States the confidence that they can meet these challenges. Commonwealth governments can take enormous pride in their record of progress and achievements in bringing more, improved and different education to their people. Enrolment rates of those between 6 and 11 years old have increased from less than 50 per cent to nearer 80 per cent; completion rates at the primary school level have improved; and transition from primary to secondary school has been significant. The numbers of children participating in technical and vocational education, the training of teachers and engagement in adult education have also seen notable improvements. Post-secondary education through colleges, polytechnics and universities have mushroomed to a point where many Commonwealth countries have started becoming exporters of education where once they were totally dependent on offshore suppliers. Our efforts at greater Commonwealth collaboration in the sharing of experience on planning, policy formulation, training, opportunities for higher education, curricula exchanges, textbook support schemes, teaching volunteers, scholarships, fellowships and study visits have all paid handsome dividends. That the Commonwealth scholarship programmes have created some 28,000 MA and PhD candidates is a remarkable achievement by any standards. Within the Commonwealth, there is a wide variety and range of people-to-people exchanges through associations and arrangements such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM), the Commonwealth Consortium for Education (CCE) and the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP); there are regular conferences, seminars and workshops; and study grants and visits have seen tremendous growth and increased performance. Ministers can also take pride in their collective wisdom in creating other Commonwealth agencies such as the official Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and the non-official Commonwealth Youth Forum, the Commonwealth Teachers' Forum and the Commonwealth Stakeholders' Forum to support and promote major developments in education with both the Commonwealth Foundation and Secretariat playing significant supportive roles. All in all we have come through a remarkable journey of five decades of exemplary international co-operation for the benefit of about one-third of humanity by drawing on 'the recognised Commonwealth strengths and characteristics which give it a comparative advantage in tackling certain of the issues we face'.⁴

Unfinished business

Notwithstanding these spectacular achievements, there are also enough reasons for the nations of the Commonwealth, both collectively and individually, to pause and reflect on the level of unfinished work. Among the many issues that require serious reflection and addressing are:

- **Deprivation:** Commonwealth countries still continue to be home to about 27 million children who have yet to have access to primary schooling. This is roughly a third of global deprivation. The Commonwealth is also home to the largest population of adult illiterates and girls out of school.
- **Marginalisation of minority groups:** There are improving legislative frameworks for inclusion of underserved groups in

many Commonwealth countries. Notwithstanding this, in practice there is still marginalisation and discrimination of children with disabilities, children belonging to ethnic minorities, those living in remote areas, school dropouts, girls, children with HIV/AIDS, street children, young offenders, children of migrant and sex workers, abused children, children living the poverty line, and children who live in difficult circumstances. Included among these are also new citizens, child soldiers, children of refugees and asylum-seekers, child victims of human trafficking, children in situations of forced labour and nomadic children.

- **Challenged nature of the management of educational services:** The management of effective, efficient and professionally driven educational services is made more difficult by, among other shortcomings, an inconsistency of policies as well as malpractices – from teacher absenteeism to a systematic corruption of processes and governance.
- **Curriculum:** School curricula require refreshing on the basis of new demands on employment and employability, citizenship, family and social responsibilities, and self-learning.
- **Teacher training and quality:** There needs to be improvement in the teacher supply levels and training, the quality of the learning environments, the quality of schools and classrooms, and the management and leadership of educational institutions.

Conclusion

During the last 50 years, public education systems across the Commonwealth have been under pressure to improve both its performance and assist in increasing the human capital of the Member States. Many have responded to these pressures by expanding, restructuring, reforming and applying a limited range of technological tools; however, there has been concern that the management styles and institutional cultures of these systems have changed little since the early days of independence. The 21st century, however, is requiring a different kind of response. The tone and substance of international debate has changed – the means have become as important as the ends. National planners and policy-makers are finding that they no longer have the last word on the way social services, such as education, ought to be conceived and managed. Citizens and users demand that their voices be heard and acted upon. Education Ministers, as they plan the future, have their work cut out for them.

Endnotes

- 1 Commonwealth Secretariat (2006). *Achieving the Goals: The Performance of Commonwealth Countries in Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Education and the Dakar Education for All Goals*. London.
- 2 Asian Development Bank (2008). *Education and Skills: Strategies for Accelerated Development in Asia and the Pacific*. Manila: ADB.
- 3 16th CCEM Communiqué.
- 4 Chief Emeka Anyaoku (1990). *The Changing Commonwealth*, 25 July 1990 at the Diplomatic and Commonwealth Writers' Association Meeting, London.

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