

Education for All



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Sixty years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that elementary education shall be free and compulsory, and that the higher levels of education will be equally available to all on merit. But has this been achieved?

While significant progress has been made since 1948, the challenge to secure the right to a meaningful education for all remains unfulfilled. Globally, more than 72 million children of primary school age are not enrolled in either a primary or a secondary school, girls making up 57% of the total (2005 data). About 60% of these girls and boys live in conflict-affected fragile states. Only 59 countries have achieved gender parity in primary and secondary school enrolments. And 774 million adults lack basic literacy skills, of whom 64% are women – a total figure that is almost certainly a significant underestimate.

These figures represent the denial of a human right. They correlate closely with the incidence of poverty across the world and signify an enduring failure to give education the attention it deserves. Without equitable access to learning, peace, security and development for all cannot be attained.

At the inception of the new millennium, international efforts to realise once and for all the right to a basic education, especially for the poorest and most disadvantaged, gained some impetus in two major global commitments. The first – the Dakar Framework for Action – signalled the intention of 164 governments to significantly expand educational opportunities for children, young people and adults by 2015, under the headline banner of Education for All (EFA). The second – the United Nations Millennium Declaration, with its focus on poverty reduction – included two education-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and targets: the achievement of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and the elimination of gender disparities in formal schooling; the former by 2015 and the latter by 2005.

Both of these commitments have endured politically. They continue to shape international dialogue at major world development forums, the levels and patterns of overseas development assistance (ODA) to education, and planning and investment in education systems in a substantial number of countries; all of this despite some strong academic critiques of the unrealistic levels of ambition enshrined in the EFA goals and MDGs and of what has been seen as the reduction of complex educational processes into simplistic numerical targets.

Since 2000, the official channels of the Commonwealth have added their formal voice of support for the achievement of the education MDGs, although they have been far less vocal on the broader agenda of EFA. In understanding the Commonwealth stance on these issues and its contribution – real and potential – to achieving these complementary global educational objectives, it is important to distinguish quite carefully between an analysis of the educational policies and performance of individual Commonwealth countries (over which the Commonwealth as an association has quite limited sway) and the distinctive influence and impact that the Commonwealth community does and can have in its various forums, networks and activities.

EFA: where does the Commonwealth stand?

The composition of the Commonwealth (9 high-income countries, 24 middle-income and 17 low-income),¹ the fact that 50% of its people live in one country (India), and the distinctive educational histories of its 53 member states mean that the importance and relevance of the education MDGs for national education sector policy and practice is very different from country to country. Indeed, for the majority of Commonwealth states, UPE defined purely in terms of school enrolment – as distinct from indicators of the completion of a full cycle of schooling of good quality – was achieved some years ago. This means that for a sizeable number of Commonwealth countries, the MDGs have limited currency.

Nevertheless, for some Commonwealth countries, especially in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, enabling children to have access to, and participate in, a meaningful formal primary school education continues to set a significant challenge. Of the 25 million or so primary age children who are not enrolled in school across the Commonwealth (approximately 34% of the global total), just under 23 million of these girls and boys live in seven countries: India and Pakistan in South Asia; and Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria and South Africa in Sub-Saharan Africa.² Together, India, Pakistan and Nigeria are home to more than 19 million out-of-school children (or 26.4% of the global total). If primary net enrolment rates (NER) are used, similar patterns emerge. Of the 18 Commonwealth countries with a primary NER of below 90 (i.e., more than ten school-age children out of every 100 are not enrolled in school), 11 are in Sub-Saharan Africa and 3 are in South Asia.



On gender parity, the geography of enrolment inequity at the primary level has evened out considerably in recent years. In 41 Commonwealth countries for which data are available, 25 have a Gender Parity Index (GPI) of between 0.98 and 1.02, with eight countries having a GPI of over 1.02, indicating a balance that favours girls rather than boys, including four countries in the Caribbean and three in Southern Africa. At the secondary level, where net enrolment rates fall below 80 in at least 26 Commonwealth member states, the gender balance is in favour of girls in 26 out of 39 Commonwealth countries.

It follows from this and from other measures of attendance, participation and completion of schooling, that the MDG education agenda is vitally important, especially for low-income Commonwealth countries. But in many respects, the wider, lifelong learning agenda encompassed by EFA has greater pertinence for the member states of the Commonwealth, recognising that UPE and gender parity are two of the six EFA goals. Early childhood education, adult literacy, new skills for young people and for adults, and a much greater concern, at all levels of education, for raising the quality of learning to match the personal, social and national needs of countries in the 21st century are all issues that concern Commonwealth citizens and their governments.

For example, nearly all Commonwealth countries are confronted with problems associated with levels of literacy in post-school populations and the constraints that ensue for developing a flexible and creative workforce and an informed citizenry. Approximately 56% of the world's total of people without basic literacy skills live in Commonwealth countries; men and women who have either

failed to acquire literacy in their youth or have lost the ability to use the skills of reading and writing, often in environments that place little importance on literacy. Some 85% of the Commonwealth total live in the three South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. But the lack of literacy is by no means confined to the lives of people in low-income countries; for example, 5 million adults cannot read and 15 million have been defined as being insufficiently numerate in the UK.

Early childhood care and education has been shown to have considerable importance for the subsequent educational and economic progress of young children, yet only 40 million or so children in Commonwealth countries are enrolled in pre-primary institutions, most of whom come from relatively prosperous urban homes.

In Commonwealth countries, as elsewhere, non-formal education is the main avenue for learning opportunities for the poor and disadvantaged who have benefited little from formal schooling; but in most instances, these programmes are small in scale and largely neglected by national governments.

The challenge of EFA is universal. And in one sense it is never resolved as education is both a product and an instigator of the social, economic and political processes of which it is an important part.

Looking ahead

The static, mid-decade picture portrayed in the previous section fails to capture where progress is being made and the complex nature of the challenges that need to be addressed. In some low-income Commonwealth countries there have been some quite remarkable efforts to push strongly towards the education-related MDGs. In Tanzania, for example, primary net enrolment increased from below 50% in 1999 to almost 100% in 2005. In 1999, there were 1.6 million children out of school in Mozambique, a figure that had been reduced to 870,000 by 2005. And in India, under the programme to universalise elementary education, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, it is estimated that there will be primary schools for every child, meeting agreed educational norms, in all Indian states by 2010.

At the same time, what these and other Commonwealth countries are recognising is that to achieve the minimalist position of the MDGs, the wider basic education goals of EFA to place education overall (including secondary and tertiary education) into the centre of national planning and development, requires a coherent, sector-wide approach to education development, sustained over time. Thus, to achieve UPE without recognising the implications that this has for secondary education and the expansion of other learning opportunities, let alone the pressures on secondary and tertiary education to provide primary teachers of good quality, requires a holistic rather than a sub-sector, single target approach to education. And a good deal more attention must be given to the quality of learning activities and processes than has been given hitherto.

The pressures these challenges exert on many national public education services are severe. Globally, it is estimated that 18 million new primary school teachers are needed if UPE is to be achieved in 2015 as pupil-teacher ratios continue to rise in Sub-



Young students in Brunei Darussalam



Young girls being educated in Rajasthan, India (Commonwealth Photographic Awards)

Saharan Africa and South Asia. Add to this a backlog of crowded, dilapidated and unhealthy classrooms, insufficient instructional time and the lack of instructional materials, then the magnitude of the supply side of the UPE equation becomes clearer. At the same time, secondary education needs to expand if skill demands are to be met, and the decline in the quality of many tertiary institutions needs to be halted. Patching up education systems and investing in discrete projects and activities is no longer enough. The countries making progress are those engaged in major education reforms with long-term planning horizons.

Addressing these systemic challenges is further complicated by many other issues that impinge on the lives of so many children, parents and teachers in Commonwealth countries, and most especially those who live with poverty. For example, the Commonwealth has a high prevalence of HIV in its member states. Although the population of Commonwealth countries is approximately 30% of the world's total, 60% of those with HIV live within the borders of its member states. The pressures this exerts on both the quality of the education system and its ability to offer the 'social vaccine' of guidance and information to counteract the spread of HIV presents a challenge of unprecedented significance, especially, but not exclusively, for countries in Southern Africa.

Tragically, the incidence of conflict and insecurity is a feature of life in a number of Commonwealth countries. As the recent Commonwealth-inspired *Civil Paths to Peace* report puts it: 'The world in which we live today is ... one of systematic group violence, in which religious, or racial, or ethnic, or territorial

divisions are used to foment violence and sometimes even genocide.' As with HIV and AIDS, the challenge is twofold: on the one hand education suffers disastrously from the impact of conflict; on the other it has enormous potential and responsibility for helping to shape a more just, equitable and peaceful world.

These and other complex challenges mean that the time-bound quantitative (and qualitative) goals and targets of the MDGs and EFA, while having considerable value in giving energy, focus and impetus to realising the right to education, have to be very carefully contextualised and managed – no more so than in the very diverse association of states that is the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth contribution

The role of the Commonwealth in supporting global agendas for educational change is defined by the nature of the association. There is little or no stand-alone Commonwealth finance for education, so its core executive machinery is severely constrained in its ability to be proactive and influential at the country level and globally. For some countries, at the upper levels of government, this results in marginal interest and engagement in Commonwealth educational activities. By and large, this means that the association has to work to its strengths, which can be categorised as:

- Offering another supportive and lobbying voice for better education for all.
- Enabling non-partisan Commonwealth technical educational dialogue.



- Facilitating a diverse network of nearly 30 Commonwealth voluntary and professional organisations in education.
- Occupying some small but important niche territories, including co-operation among universities in Commonwealth countries, being proactive in distance learning, sustaining scholarship programmes, promoting school links and generally enabling a diversity of professional exchange.

Assessing the collective influence and impact of the totality of this work on progress towards the MDGs and EFA is problematic, if not impossible. Regular meetings of Commonwealth heads of government and education ministers have been clear in their support for the MDGs and to a lesser degree EFA but without being able to define in any very specific terms distinctive roles for the Commonwealth within these global parameters. Specialist meetings, publications and protocols on particular topics clearly have their own value, and the Commonwealth Secretariat's work on gender and manuals on good practice in specialist areas is respected. Similarly the Commonwealth of Learning offers a distinctive service on a topic of great relevance to the expansion of a cost-effective basic education for all.

In 2009, in Malaysia, the Commonwealth will celebrate 50 years since its first ministerial conference on education. This would seem to be an opportune time to both reflect on its achievements and chart a new and perhaps reinvigorated role for its work. While

signing up publicly to the MDG and EFA agendas is a desirable political act, the ability of the major organisations of the Commonwealth to have impact on the levels of reform that are needed in the Commonwealth countries faced with the greatest challenges is severely constrained. A role that builds on the strengths of the association – notably the educational expertise that can be mobilised across the Commonwealth – and that acknowledges much more clearly the diversity of its constituency may well be a sensible starting point.

Endnotes

- 1 Excluding Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu.
- 2 The total figure is for 42 Commonwealth countries for which data are available.

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