

Viewpoint:

Can the Commonwealth impact on the quality of education in sub-Saharan Africa?

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The Commonwealth institutions, given their limited resources, have been trying to cover too wide an education agenda. This particularly applies to the Secretariat and the Foundation. In reality, they can largely only cover their own costs (and what impact they have is not by way of channelling resources). The Commonwealth of Learning is the exception to this pattern.

Looking at Commonwealth civil society engagement in education, the majority of the players are voluntary organisations, with unpaid, albeit motivated, staff. These organisations lack capacity and therefore are in no place to improve the quality of education when acting in isolation.

So what do we do? Do we give up? Do we simply say that there are other actors better suited and better funded to take on the education agenda, and that the 'Commonwealth family' is simply irrelevant?

We think not. We suggest that the Commonwealth institutions could have a key role to play in the delivery of quality education in member countries. But what do these institutions need to do to enable greater impact?

There needs to be major changes. First, the education agenda followed by the official Commonwealth organisations needs to be specific to the needs highlighted by Commonwealth countries themselves and the agenda has to be limited to a few areas where the Commonwealth can add significant value. Second, we believe that the Commonwealth institutions need to engage with both leading donors in their membership and leading global non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to develop a Commonwealth-specific programme to improve the quality of education. There is no reason why ActionAid, Save the Children, Plan and others should not be directly involved with delivering and funding a Commonwealth education programme facilitated by the Secretariat and co-funded by bilateral donors.

What might a Commonwealth-specific programme contain? The majority of Commonwealth countries use English as a language of instruction in schools, following foundation phase use of mother tongue. However, in rural schools in particular, the quality of English being taught as a second language and then being used to provide instruction in later grades is often very poor.

A common programme that focuses on the effective use of the language by teachers and students, driven by the Commonwealth, would be a valuable contribution.

Language proficiency is clearly linked to literacy, and this should be another key focus area. In turn, literacy must be harnessed to the increasing access to information in developing countries, including

in rural areas, using offline materials in the form of books, periodicals and newspapers. Libraries are expensive and the British Council, for one, has closed almost all its libraries following years of cuts. But libraries are vital and their closure is false economy.

Finally, whether it be at the Commonwealth, Ministry of Education, district education offices or in schools, leadership is critical. Language, literacy, libraries and leadership: we believe that if we focused our resources in these four areas, we could make a significant difference to the lives of millions of people and help the Commonwealth deliver on its unique strengths.

These are our modest ideas, informed by discussion with four Commonwealth countries (Kampala Seminar 18–23 June 2012). As we have stated, the education agenda should be set by the ministries of education in Commonwealth Countries. But Commonwealth ministers in many developing countries are aware that the supply side of the traditional schooling model, with high school graduates being trained as teachers and deployed in rural areas, simply cannot cope with demand. This crisis of quality could provide the space for new technologies to be employed, enabling the 'virtual classroom' to become a reality. Leaders in 54 member countries can enable this shift and demonstrate it to scale in co-ordinated fashion – but not if the Commonwealth waves goodbye to its education commitments and programmes.

In 2012, a new organisation, the Link Umlambo Leadership Institute, will be created by Link and the Umlambo Foundation, with particular focus on improving the quality of leadership in schools in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

Madame Phumzile Mlambo Ncuka is former Deputy President of South Africa and has also served as Minister of Minerals and Energy and Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry. She began her professional life as a teacher in Kwa Zulu Natal and was elected to parliament in 1994. Among other engagements, Madame Phumzile is a member of the Global Leaders Council on MDGs. She founded the Umlambo Foundation in 2008 and is its Executive Chair. She is currently developing the Link Umlambo Trust in partnership with Link Community Development, of which **Stephen Blunden** has been CEO for 18 years. Stephen has been an active member of the Commonwealth Consortium for Education, co-facilitating the 2010 Zimbabwe Education Seminars and the 2012 Achievable Education for All seminar in Kampala, as well as participating in the planning of the 18CCEM in Mauritius.