

COMMONWEALTH CO-OPERATION IN AFRICA

Rex E O Akpofure, Director Education Division, Commonwealth Secretariat

The Commonwealth Today

The Commonwealth is a free association of states, one of the world's strongest voluntary international organizations. In February 1979 it had 40 members ranging from several hundred million in population to a few thousand. They include some of the world's richest nations and many of the poorest.

The Commonwealth contains people of many faiths, races, languages and cultures linked through shared traditions and the belief that their interests are served by partnership. Among member countries English is the common language, and ideals about human rights, law, education and government are shared. These beliefs are enshrined in the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles (a copy of which may be obtained from the Commonwealth Secretariat).

All Commonwealth nations believe in and work for the success of the United Nations. The overwhelming majority of them belong to other regional or world-wide international associations, economic or political, Commonwealth membership is not an alternative, but a complement, to forms of international co-operation.

The summit of Commonwealth relationships is the meeting of Heads of Government, held every two years. Other Ministers - finance, law, health, education - also hold regular meetings, to help formulate policies and to advance the interests of their own nations and the world at large. The central body for co-operation between Commonwealth Governments is the Secretariat, established in 1965.

Governmental co-operation in the Commonwealth is crucial, but by no means everything. There is also a massive network of relationships between organizations and individuals in Commonwealth countries, more intimate and friendly than in any other international group of such diversity. The Commonwealth, world-wide, is a framework for friendship, frank speaking and mutual understanding.

Julius Nyerere summed up the essence of the Commonwealth and the value of the co-operation which it can generate when he said, "The Commonwealth is people meeting together, consulting, learning from each other, trying to persuade each other and sometimes co-operating with each other, regardless of economics or geography or ideology or religion or race. It is this which makes the Commonwealth valuable".

Commonwealth Co-operation

(a) The Commonwealth Secretariat

The Commonwealth, through its Secretariat, is active in a variety of fields. Apart from its regular budget, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) is the

largest and best known. It is a voluntary pledging fund and is administered in three main divisions;

(i) General Technical Assistance

(ii) Education and Training

(iii) Export Market Development

Co-operation in Africa also takes place through the Commonwealth Science Programme, the Youth Programme, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) and the Southern Africa Programme for Zimbabwe and Namibia. Functional Divisions in the Commonwealth Secretariat such as Rural Development and Food Production, Health, Economics, Law and Education are also deeply involved in co-operative activities.

(b) The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation

The General Technical Assistance Division of CFTC has been active in Africa in a variety of specialist fields through the recruitment and support of experts and advisers requested by member governments in Africa. Through this programme, for example, correspondence course writers have been recruited for the Botswana Extension College and the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre, and an evaluator of correspondence material has been employed for the past two years in Lesotho. In the same way the Mauritius Institute of Education requested, and was provided with, an expert to set up a micro-teaching unit and another expert to develop the printing facilities required by the Institute.

The Education and Training Programme of CFTC is responsible for funding many of the seminars, workshops and conferences that are organized by the Education Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat. It is also the channel for assisting countries who have personnel in key posts for which further training or experience is necessary. In this way teachers have been enabled to attend training courses which provided them with such basic skills as to enable them to take responsibility for schools broadcasting, establish audio visual aid centres or set up production centres for instructional materials. Study visits have been arranged for persons newly appointed to posts of responsibility to enable them to see successful programmes in other developing countries where conditions are similar to those in their own country.

The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan has benefited all Commonwealth teachers. Through it, graduates are nominated by their country for places at a wide range of Commonwealth universities to undertake postgraduate studies. At present, more than 1,000 places are provided each year, but Ministers for Education have called for more so as to increase the number to 1,500 awards throughout member countries.

(c) The work of the Education Division

The work of the Education Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat is determined largely by the recommendations made by Commonwealth Ministers of Education at their triennial meetings, the last of which was held in Accra, Ghana, in 1977. With its small staff of

seven professional officers working under a Director and Assistant Director, the Education Division is currently engaged in programmes covering the fields of teacher education, educational media, universal primary education, science and mathematics education, technical education, non-formal education, curriculum, examinations, higher education, educational administration and book development. In addition to this, the Education Division is engaged in a programme of teaching about the Commonwealth through its varied activities and through the materials it produces and distributes to Ministries of Education regularly, and especially for Commonwealth Day now held on the second Monday of March each year.

In recent years, the Education Division has undertaken a number of programmes related to teacher education, of which this present workshop is but one. Studies have been commissioned to investigate alternative approaches to the training of teachers and a Handbook on In-service Teacher Education, has been published.

At the invitation of the Federal Government of Nigeria, the Division provided assistance and advice on its preparations for Universal Primary Education which was launched in 1976.

In 1973, a Specialist Conference was held in Nairobi concerning the training of teachers in developing countries of the Commonwealth. This was followed by three other Pan-Commonwealth Conference in subjects related to teacher education. The first of these was held in New Zealand in 1975 on the development, production and distribution of materials for learning and teaching. This was followed in the same year by a conference in Australia on educational broadcasting for development.

The most recent specialist conference was held in January 1979 in India to examine the problems of non-formal education for all those who fail to get into the formal system of education or who, for various reasons, drop out from it. The main concern therefore was for women and girls in developing countries and for the educationally deprived who are sometimes described as the 'drop outs', 'push outs' and 'left outs'. The role of teachers in non-formal education is an important issue, not only in Africa but worldwide, and the conference emphasized among other things the training that is needed for teachers and other agents involved in non-formal education. The report of the conference will be published in August of this year.

Recently a survey was conducted to examine progress towards universal primary education throughout the Commonwealth and a regional seminar for Africa will be held in Lesotho in February 1980.

In Science education, workshops in Tanzania, the Bahamas and Papua New Guinea have been held on the production of low cost science teaching equipment.

In book development, workshops have been organized in India and Nigeria and a six-week training course was arranged in Guyana in 1977. It was following an advisory visit by a member of staff that the Nigerian Book Development Council was set up.

In educational administration, training courses of ten weeks duration have been arranged in Fiji for the Pacific region and in Nairobi for Africa.

Support for technical education throughout the Commonwealth has been provided by regional seminars, the setting up of the Commonwealth Industrial Training Experience Programme (CITEP) and the recent formation of a Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa.

The Future

The next Commonwealth Education Conference will be held in Sri Lanka in 1980 and Ministers for Education will be determining their educational priorities which form the basis of the work programme of the Education Division. It is likely that recommendations will be made to enter into the fields of non-formal education and special education. Similarly, the increasing cost of formal schooling is likely to be re-examined and possible alternatives investigated, together with studies as to how costs can be reduced. To this end, a series of regional meetings is already planned to examine ways and means by which low cost instructional materials can be developed.

The future of Commonwealth co-operation depends on this form of dialogue and consultation which has been a feature of our interaction so far. Increasingly, the Commonwealth is exploring avenues of greater collaboration with other international organizations such as the OAU, ECA, IBE, UNESCO, UNICEF, WCOTP and L'Agence de Co-operation Culturelle et Technique for the benefit of the people, not only of Africa, but also of its other regions and continents. Given the background of common institutions even where local adaptations and other changes have taken place, the informal nature of Commonwealth consultation and co-operation, with its unique flexibility in accommodating new ideas, has continued to hold out the hope to its members of growing co-operation, not merely in our own field of education but also in health, finance and economic affairs, agriculture and science policy and in administrative matters. In this way, though its resources are limited, its contribution to the international order is increasingly recognized in the counsels of the nations.