

Part Two
Themes and Concerns

Chapter 2

Education for All in the Commonwealth: What are the Issues?

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1 Preliminary

This chapter is based on a lecture given at the Palace of Westminster, London on 14 March 2002, under the auspices of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth and the UK National Commission for UNESCO. It is included here because it moves forward from the past achievements and challenges surveyed in Chapter 1 to suggest what will be the main education issues to be confronted by the Commonwealth in the next decades.

I was pleased to be invited to pose these ideas (in the Mother of Parliaments) by the Council for Education in the Commonwealth. I particularly admire the way that the Council involves parliamentarians in its membership and activities. At UNESCO, as we try to increase the momentum of the movement towards education for all, we are discovering how important the support of parliamentarians can be. Parliamentarians have one foot in government and the other in civil society. One of our key principles in the campaign for education for all is the involvement of civil society. Sadly, there are still countries where the notion of civil society is still regarded with suspicion. However, those countries often have the beginnings of functioning parliaments and the parliamentarians are eager to get involved in issues outside the legislature like education.

To give a concrete example, the MINEDAF VIII meeting of the ministers of education of Africa held in Mauritius in December 2002 also saw the launch of the Forum of African Parliamentarians for Education. Groups of parliamentarians from each sub-region of Africa met for a planning meeting in Dakar, Senegal in January and showed tremendous enthusiasm for this development. Such initiatives help to strengthen democracy by involving parliamentarians in real issues and also

promote the advancement of education by multiplying the number of informed supporters.

This was the first time that I addressed a Commonwealth body since joining UNESCO in 2001. However, I felt that I was among friends. I am a citizen of two Commonwealth countries, Canada and the UK, and am proud to have played a small role in the creation of the Commonwealth of Learning. The decision to establish COL was taken at the Vancouver Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Vancouver in 1987. Subsequent to that meeting I was asked to chair the planning committee for COL and was later briefly a member of the COL board until I moved to the UK in 1990. Over the years I had many contacts with the Education Department of the Commonwealth Secretariat and was delighted that people who had contributed to the important work of that department were present when I gave my original lecture, from which this chapter derives.

2 The Commonwealth and the Drive towards Education for All

At the Dakar Forum held two years ago, UNESCO was charged with co-ordinating the complex process of ensuring progress towards Education for All. That responsibility is at the heart of my duties as UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education. The CEC's invitation made me ask myself what is special or different about the Commonwealth in the drive towards education for all. Are the 54 member states of the Commonwealth simply a typical subset of UNESCO's 186 member states or does the Commonwealth have a special profile as far as EFA is concerned?

My remarks will examine this question and will be in four unequal parts. First, I shall look at the Commonwealth and compare it to the wider community of nations in terms of key indicators. Second, I shall turn to the educational indicators. Are the countries of the Commonwealth doing better or worse than the others in progressing toward education for all? Third, I shall recall the goals of the campaign to deliver Education for All and comment briefly on the strategy for achieving them. Does the Commonwealth have a comparative advantage in this vital endeavour? Finally, I shall look in a general way at the goals of education. Should the current geopolitical climate, notably the preoccupation with terrorism, lead us to change our priorities for education and, if so, how?

3 The Commonwealth within the World Community of Nations

I start with a few words on the Commonwealth in the context of the global community of nations. The 1.7 billion people of the Commonwealth represent 30% of the world's population. The 54 states of the Commonwealth make up a similar proportion of the nations of the world. Some readers will be more expert on the Commonwealth than I am, but it seems to me that the states of the Commonwealth are, in most ways, a pretty representative sample of the membership of the UN. The Commonwealth has rich states and poor states. It has states with very large land-

masses and others that are tiny islands. These islands have very small populations, yet at the other end of the scale several Commonwealth members have very large populations.

The ministers of education of the nine most populous developing countries meet regularly under the auspices of UNESCO, calling themselves the E9. Four of those states are in the Commonwealth: Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and Pakistan. (The others are Brazil, China, Egypt, Indonesia and Mexico.) The E9 is an example of various groups that meet under the auspices of UNESCO. Other examples are the regional meetings of education ministers, such as the grouping of African ministers, MINEDAF, that I already mentioned.

Less visible to me are the more informal groupings of nations that are convened in Paris by the countries' permanent delegates to UNESCO. I am thinking of regional groupings, such as the EU group, but also subsets of countries such as the group of 77. I understand that there is a Commonwealth group as well. These groups are not very visible to the staff of UNESCO because we tend to deal with states either individually or regionally – this is as it should be.

However, my final general point is that working within UNESCO makes one realise the considerable assets of the Commonwealth group of nations when you compare the Commonwealth to the community of nations as a whole. I refer to the statement on the Commonwealth website which reads:

With a common working language and similar systems of law, public administration and education, the Commonwealth has built on its shared history to become a vibrant and growing association of states in tune with the modern world.

As I sit in UNESCO meetings with simultaneous translation going on in six languages I realise what an advantage it is to have a common working language. As I work with my UNESCO staff colleagues, and observe the variety of cultural assumptions we bring to the functioning of the organisation, I understand how much easier discussions are if you have similar systems of law, public administration and education.

4 Education: The Commonwealth and the Rest Compared

An interesting question, which brings me to the second part of these remarks, is whether these shared features of the Commonwealth give its members a different profile of performance as regards education. Obviously, such comparisons are very tricky because of the great diversity within the Commonwealth. With that caveat, however, I make some observations.

First, let us look at the old Commonwealth – Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK; they are all placed well in the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment published last year by the OECD. The programme measured reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy, and these Commonwealth countries ranked high on all three.

Second, as regards the newer states of the Commonwealth, my colleague Hilaire Mputu at UNESCO has made some comparisons among those states that are working to achieve Education for All within the framework set by the Dakar Forum nearly two years ago. He judges that most Commonwealth developing countries are in a better situation as regards EFA than their counterparts who are not Commonwealth members.

Net enrolment ratios in most Commonwealth developing countries are over 80% and many of these countries are either on the point of attaining – or have already attained – the goal of universal primary education (UPE in our jargon). This is important because research by the World Bank and others shows very clearly that getting most of the population to complete primary education of decent quality is the foundation for economic development. Until a country reaches that threshold, attempts at sustainable development will not succeed.

Let me put some figures to the comparisons between Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth in sub-Saharan Africa. As regards access to school, enrolment rates are higher in the Commonwealth group than in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. From 1990 to 1998, the median net enrolment ratios rose from 78% to 87% in the region's Commonwealth countries. The rise in the remaining countries was from 51% to 56%.

Another very favourable indicator for the Commonwealth African group, which relates to my comment about the importance of completing primary education, is that Commonwealth countries show low levels of repetition compared to the others, which have high levels of repetition. This means that the Commonwealth group has higher internal efficiency in education, by which I mean low drop-out and low wastage, compared to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. I would be interested to have others' explanations as to why both old and new Commonwealth countries perform well on educational indicators compared to non-Commonwealth countries. After all, Britain itself – or at least England – was rather a laggard in bringing a decent education to all citizens.

However, the Commonwealth picture is not all rosy. It will not surprise you that most of the low-achieving Commonwealth countries are in sub-Saharan Africa. We are particularly concerned that some of these countries, such as Cameroon, Gambia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Tanzania, risk not attaining the EFA goals for 2015. I shall come to those goals later in this chapter. We also worry that some countries, which have made significant progress in the past, now show signs of faltering or even slipping back. I refer to Cameroon, Ghana, India, Kenya, Kiribati, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and Zambia. However, the good news is that other countries, such as Malawi and Uganda, have achieved dramatic progress in expanding enrolment and reducing gender disparity.

But there are no grounds for complacency. One of our problems is that collecting reliable data takes time. We can only compare countries on the basis of data for enrolments and repetition rates that are several years old. Yet we know that recent

events, such as the continuing spread of the AIDS pandemic and the multiplication of conflicts, are likely to have moved the figures for some countries in the wrong direction.

5 Education for All: Where are We?

This brings me to the third section of this exploration of the issues we must address in achieving EFA in the Commonwealth. Let me now draw back and look at EFA in the world as a whole.

The simplest way of expressing the bad news is through the raw absolute numbers. Today there are over 100 million children, 60% of them girls, who never go to school at all. At least an equivalent number do start school but drop out – or are taken out for economic reasons – before they have learned anything useful. The unschooled children of previous generations are today's adult illiterates and we estimate there are 850 million of them, 500 million women and 350 million men. In our contemporary world one woman in four is illiterate.

However, other absolute numbers also contain some good news. The total number of primary school pupils rose from an estimated 500 million in 1975 to more than 680 million in 1998. If this pace of increase were to continue, the number of pupils in the world's primary schools would reach 700 million in 2005 and 770 million in 2015. Nearly all this increase in demand for school places, if satisfied, would occur in developing countries, notably in southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

It is easier to understand the challenge if I express it in proportionate terms. For most developing countries, school enrolment growth of 5% per year until 2015 would achieve the target of Education for All by that year. However, several countries would have to grow at 10% annually, which is quite a challenge. That would leave at least 32 countries that are unlikely to meet the 2015 target of Education for All without very special efforts. Nearly half of these countries are, or have until recently, been embroiled in conflict.

Sub-Saharan Africa is of particular concern, because enrolment there will have to increase at almost three times the rates achieved in the 1990s in order to meet the 2015 target. Almost half of the additional school places that the world requires are in this region. As I said earlier, the Commonwealth countries are generally in better shape than the rest, but there is a long way to go.

6 What is Being Done?

So what is being done to ensure that we go the distance? Education for All was set as a goal in the UNESCO constitution of 1945. The countries that signed that declaration stated their belief in 'full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge'.

In 1990 the goal of Education for All was restated at a conference in Jomtien,

Thailand. In 2000, 164 countries came together in Dakar, Senegal for the World Education Forum. They declared:

We re-affirm the vision of the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien 1990), supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that all children, young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of that term.

But what assurance do we have that anything will be different this time round? Doesn't it begin to look as if Education for All, like tomorrow, is always talked about but never comes? Without denying that the task is very challenging, I do believe that the current situation is different. The Dakar Forum drew some lessons from the relative lack of progress towards EFA in the decade after Jomtien. It did not merely set new targets. It outlined a strategy and put in place a series of follow-up mechanisms. In my work at UNESCO I am right at the heart of those follow-up mechanisms and therefore have a good overview of the considerable efforts being deployed.

Let me start with the targets and then comment on the strategy and mechanisms. There are six targets, which I find it helpful to remember with the acronym GET EQUAL.

The first target concerns *Girls and gender*. The goal is to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieve gender equality by 2015 – with a special focus on ensuring full and equal access for girls to basic education of good quality. This is also one of the UN's Millennium goals to which the Commonwealth Heads of Government recommitted themselves at their CHOGM meeting in Coolom, Australia in March 2002.

E is for *Elementary or primary education*, where the deadline is to ensure that by 2015 all children, especially girls, children in difficult circumstances, and from ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality. This is also a Millennium Development Goal.

T is for *Training*, to ensure that the learning needs of all young people are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes. This obviously relates to the strong emphasis that the recent CHOGM put on youth.

The next *E* is for *Early childhood*. The goal is to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

QU stands for *Quality*, without which all the rest is pointless. The Dakar Forum charged us to improve all aspects of the quality of education to achieve recognised and measurable learning outcomes for all – especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Finally, *AL* stands for *Adult Literacy*, the challenge of achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, as well as equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults.

So there are three quantitative targets with deadlines and three that are qualitative. The whole package is called EFA. One of our challenges at UNESCO is to keep the focus on the package as a whole. It is legitimate that particular countries, agencies or donors should focus on a particular goal. This does not mean, however, that universal primary education, to take the most common example, represents the totality of EFA.

What is the strategy for achieving these goals? The first principle is that the primary responsibility for achieving Education for All lies with national governments. International and bilateral agencies can help, but the basic drive has to come from the country itself. In Dakar all countries committed themselves to developing national plans for Education for All by 2002 at the latest. The international community promised in return that no country seriously committed to Education for All would be thwarted in its achievement of this goal by lack of resources. Getting these plans finished, and calling in the promise about resources, is at the heart of my work at UNESCO at the moment.

The promise about resources needs to be kept in perspective. At present 97% of the resources devoted to education in developing countries come from the countries themselves and only 3% from the international sources. The challenge for the planners in these countries is to chart a sustainable strategy for achieving education for all. For most this will mean some reallocation of resources to education from, say, military expenditure. It will often mean reallocation of resources within the education budget to basic education and away from other levels. Some African governments, for instance, at present spend one hundred times as much per capita on university students as on pupils in primary school.

What will be the total bill for achieving Education for All? This is, of course, a complex calculation that is very dependent on the assumptions that you make. OXFAM and UNICEF estimate the cost at an extra \$7–8 billion per year. UNESCO and the World Bank have figures in the range of \$13–15 billion. Although these figures differ by a factor of two they do give us the scale of the problem. We all have our favourite comparisons. The US has just increased its defence budget by \$48 billion. One third of that increase, applied year on year, would take care of Education for All. But let's not pick only on the Americans. I gather that the amount of money that Europeans spend each year on bottled mineral water would also cover the cost of achieving Education for All.

The events of September 2001 and their sequel will have an impact on progress towards Education for All. We now live, in Charles Dickens' famous words, in the best of times and the worst of times. It is the best of times because there has never been a greater awareness that the disparities between people are not just bad for the poor, but also dangerous for the rich. It is the worst of times because old habits die hard. Having raised the cry of 'terrorism', America is now encouraging other states to attempt a military response to the global social problems and injustices that breed discontent.

Of course, another problem in all areas of development is that the industrial countries engage in much self-cancelling expenditure. On the one hand, western countries eagerly sell arms to the parties involved in the world's many conflicts and civil wars. On the other, they wring their hands about the difficulty of educating children in situations of conflict. Or take agriculture. Rich countries, through their foreign aid budgets, attempt to alleviate rural poverty in the developing world. Yet the rich countries subsidise their own farmers to the tune of \$1 billion per day, which is more than six times their entire foreign-aid budget. These subsidies to rich farmers have the direct effect of throwing millions of farmers in the third world deeper into poverty.

However, we have to deal with the world as we find it, contradictions and all. We are finding that the greatest challenge in ensuring progress towards Education for All is, as so often, the challenge of co-ordinating the efforts of the various players. We try to help countries that want to achieve Education for All to translate their political will into an effective plan. But that plan is not an end in itself.

Funding EFA is not the reward for a perfect national plan. It has to be part of the dynamic national planning process led by the ministry of finance. That process has, in turn, to be set in the complex framework of arrangements by which the World Bank and the IMF apply debt relief and concessionary loans to the general goals of poverty alleviation and development. It is a world of acronyms, such as HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Countries), PRSPs (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers), UNDAF (United Nations Development Assistance Framework) and CCAs (Common Country Assessments).

Fortunately, I do believe we are making progress. The World Bank is engaging more and more resolutely with this process and has brought out proposals for a financing framework for EFA. The G8 Summit in 2002 played a helpful role in making all the EFA processes flow together. The Canadians, who were the G8 hosts, took an admirably open and transparent approach to the preparation of the educational agenda for the summit, consulting a range of NGOs on their proposals, which are also available on the web for comment by the general public. The G8's education task force has also linked up with meetings on the World Bank's proposal for a financing framework.

The governments of rich countries, such as the UK, can play a vital role in ensuring that the various international bodies work together effectively in processes like EFA. For example UNESCO has been given an overall co-ordinating role, the World Bank is obviously best placed to put together a financing framework, UNICEF is taking a special interest in girls' education and the FAO has a special interest in rural education. Making sure that all these efforts kick into the same goal is a considerable challenge. I would like to pay tribute to the UK government and in particular to Clare Short, former Secretary of State for International Development, for the part the UK has played in ensuring that the international community does work together as it is meant to.

Viewed from Paris, the UK Department for International Development looks a

very impressive operation and I notice that other countries, including the USA, defer to its maturity and experience in development matters. I should also like to commend and thank the UK for the recent announcement of a Jubilee Fund of £10 million for EFA in the Commonwealth.

Readers will form their own judgements on the attention paid to EFA within the various Commonwealth forums. I was very pleased by the communiqué that came out of the last Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 2001. What particularly pleased me was its support of the Dakar goals and its commentary on EFA in that framework. The 15-year timeframe of the Dakar goals is clearly a long period in the context of politics. There is always a temptation to want to make a new declaration or to cut a new ribbon. However, all the evidence shows that achieving EFA requires a long-term sustained commitment. That is why progress is slower than we would like. But the answer is to commit to the long haul, not to change objectives every few years.

I was also pleased that the Commonwealth ministers started from the belief that education is a human right. This is very much our position at UNESCO. Education is also, of course, a key tool for economic and social development but it is, first and foremost, a human right.

Amartya Sen has put these aims together very well in his inspiring book *Development as Freedom*. He shows that development and human rights are two sides of the same coin. He defines development simply as the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Freedom is central to the process of development for two reasons. The first is an evaluative reason. The central criterion for the assessment of progress is whether the freedoms that people have are enhanced. The second reason relates to effectiveness. It is primarily through the free agency of people that development is achieved. So the expansion of freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development. Basic education, in turn, is central to the expansion of freedom.

I am less clear about what to make of the communiqué and declarations that came out of the Coolum CHOGM. In my quick reading of those documents I could not help thinking that the drafters had worked very hard to keep the word 'education' out of the texts! Certainly there is a good focus on youth – and mention of youth leadership education – but there is very little about education more generally. I hope this does not signal any lessening of the importance of education in the minds of Commonwealth leaders, but simply that they trust their ministers of education to get on with the job.

7 What Kind of Education?

I come now to my final section and some comments about what kind of education we aspire to bring to all. One of the Dakar goals is to improve all aspects of the quality of education in order to achieve recognised and measurable learning outcomes for all – especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The World Bank has been doing some good work on the question of quality by asking the simple question, 'how much education does it take to make a difference?' The answer, in the Bank's inimitable language, is that 'countries may be trapped in a low-returns equilibrium until their level of human capital accumulation rises beyond five or six years of schooling. Once the threshold is passed, countries seem to achieve a higher steady-state growth path.'

In simple language this means, as I have already noted, that getting a decent proportion of kids to complete primary school is more important than worrying about gross enrolment rates. Quality education means working at reducing repetition rates so that completion of primary school is something that parents and children can aspire to.

Since the Dakar Forum we have had 9/11. Many believe that those attacks make it even more urgent to reduce the disparities in today's world, notably through education. But many are also asking 'education for what?' Even before 11 September, ministers of education were asking themselves whether, in assessing the quality of education, the habitual focus on individual student performance needed to be balanced by attention to the role of good education in contributing to the creation of harmonious communities.

The part of the Halifax communiqué where Commonwealth ministers talk about education in indigenous languages and the importance of inclusiveness and cultural sensitivity is encouraging in this regard.

The challenge in education, it seems to me, is to achieve a proper balance between the creation of human capital and the creation of social capital. Human capital means the individual knowledge and skills that make a person more autonomous, more flexible and more productive. It is the personal capital that you or I can invest in finding fulfilment in our lives. But human capital is not enough by itself. No man is an island. We also need social capital, which is trust in other people, networks of contacts and the coming together of people for a common goal that creates communities. The Commonwealth itself is a good example of the creation of social capital on a global scale. But there is a good analogy for this blend of human and social capital in a new phenomenon that is outside the Commonwealth, at least for the time being. I refer to the new Euro banknotes. On one side of each note there is a depiction of a window or a door. This can be a symbol of the creation of human capital as education allows us to look out on the world, to understand it and to prepare to take our place in it. On the other side of each note – and each note represents a particular era of architecture from Rome to the 20th century – a bridge is depicted. This can be a symbol for social capital, the creation of links to other people and other communities that allows us to live together constructively in societies – in other words, a symbol for education that helps us learn to live together.

Earlier I said that the Commonwealth countries were generally ahead of the pack in progress to EFA. Are they ahead of the pack in helping their people learn to

EDUCATION FOR ALL IN THE COMMONWEALTH: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

live together? Certainly the Commonwealth itself has been an invaluable mechanism for helping to resolve disputes once they arise. However, recent and current events in India, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe, to mention but three Commonwealth countries, show that conflict surfaces in the Commonwealth all too frequently. This is a big challenge to us all.