

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

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COMMONWEALTH YOUTH AND STUDENTS IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

Global uncertainties

The theme of my address is: **Commonwealth Youth and Students in times of uncertainty.**

I wish to start by stating that the underlying values of the Commonwealth are the promotion of a sense of sharing, cultivation of a common purpose and enhance cooperation for the collective good among the Commonwealth family. The Commonwealth youth and students expect nothing less in this regard.

Indeed, it is in times of uncertainty and of dire need that we often know who our friends are. As the adage goes, a friend in need is a friend in deed. Therefore, this is the opportunity for the Commonwealth to shine and demonstrate its caring values.

The Seventeenth Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers is taking place in a unique global context. For instance, global markets are in turmoil; the trading system has been destabilized; the export markets of some commodities are dysfunctional.

Further, the world is faced with environmental challenges; droughts and floods are posing serious problems to food security.

In addition, there are global health challenges. For example, communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, Malaria, HINI and others are threatening global travel and public health. Furthermore, there are political conflicts and terrorism which pose physical insecurity to people and nations.

These issues should form the backdrop of this Conference. These uncertainties should in particular, signal to us that the education sector is faced with ever evolving global challenges. It is imperative, therefore, that this Conference should

aim beyond the current global challenges to set new goals and targets for Commonwealth cooperation.

There could, therefore, never be a better time than now, for us to ask some critical questions: How could education respond to these challenges and how would such challenges impact on Commonwealth education cooperation in the future?

My intention is to focus mainly on the people, the youth and the students, rather than necessarily on education structures, processes or programmes, arguing that the people's needs should determine the education and training programmes of the Commonwealth and not the other way round. In this way Commonwealth education and training programmes should respond to the real needs of the youth and students.

Education is about people

Education is about people, while schooling is about learners. The majority of the beneficiaries of formal education in our countries are the youth. The current youth are living in times of uncertainty. Their hopes and aspirations; their fears and apprehensions; and their opportunities and possibilities are to a certain extent prescribed by the current global circumstances.

The role of education in addressing some of these challenges can therefore not be over-emphasized.

How then can education address the needs of a variety of youth groups? How should the Commonwealth mobilize its collective resources to give new hopes and opportunities to the youth? How best could the Commonwealth governments share resources in order to increase funding for education?

The young people find themselves in different social segments and thus, have a variety of education and training needs. For instance, there are youth in schools; there are youth out of schools; there is the Girl Child; there is the Boy Child; there are rural youth; there are urban youth; there are youth from wealth households; there are youth from poor households; there are youth with disabilities; and there are youth from marginalized communities. Nonetheless, as segmented and socially fragmented as they may be, they are the youth of today with one thing in common: they demand equal educational, training and employment opportunities. The current global environment has heightened the anxiety of the youth of today. They are often concerned about employment, personal security, and diseases, among others. The ethical bankruptcy of today's society has forced some youth to find refuge in religious extremism and/or drug and substance abuse.

Education with its inherent potential as the greatest equaliser seems to be the only agency which can restore faith and hope in the future.

The youth in schools are faced with the daunting challenges of completion; under-achievement; and underperformance. Retention rates may be influenced by poverty, gender parity, unfavourable conditions in schools; long distances from home to school; cultural patterns and practices, or economic conditions.

Commonwealth governments can promote retention by building schools within reasonable distances, creating better conditions of, and conducive environment for learning, and mobilizing communities to value and participate in education.

Under-achievement and underperformance could be addressed by training and recruiting well qualified teachers; the provision of special incentives packages to teachers, especially those in rural areas; the provision of adequate learning and instructional materials and above all by training school heads who are able to manage schools properly.

This is the time to encourage us all not to be content with managing schools as usual but as unusual. The nonchallant attitude of business as usual must be replaced by business as unusual as we take into cognisance the unusual global circumstances.

Out of school Youth or school drop-out rates pose a challenge to society.

Due to high levels of unemployment in most of our countries, out of school youth suffer a double jeopardy of non-schooling and consequently unemployment. This happens particularly to the youth from poor households. Such a situation is socially and politically untenable. The current global financial turmoil is exacerbating the employment prospects of out of school youth and something must be done about it.

Programmes to address the educational and training needs of out of school youth should include literacy and numeracy programmes; skills training; training in entrepreneurship and youth development. Civil society and the private sector should be encouraged to join governments to provide training to out-of-school youth.

The youth from poor households or marginalized communities face peculiar education challenges. They cannot afford school fees; school uniforms and transport to school. Pro-poor policies and measures are needed to help them access schooling.

The Girl Child is faced with myriads of social challenges in accessing and completing education. These include cultural practices and expectations, domestic chores; teenage pregnancies; poverty; and social discrimination.

Programmes to promote gender equity require political support and commitment. Such programmes should remove cultural, social and economic barriers which hinder the Girl Child to enjoying equal opportunity to schooling, retention and completion. The Forum for African Women Educationalists ((FAWE) has developed special programmes in Namibia and other African countries to promote education of the Girl-Child. Similar programmes could be promoted by the Commonwealth.

In pastoral and nomadic communities boys are expected to look after domestic animals. Such boys tend to start schooling at advanced age. In Namibia a programme of mobile schools has changed the schooling needs of the youth of the Himba nomadic communities. This suggests that innovative ways could be found to create inclusive education programmes for all, by all and from all.

Furthermore, in Namibia a special programme targeting the San youth is making it possible for such youth to access education. The San Development Programmes are making a difference to the education of the hunter-gather cultural communities.

All in all, the success of our education and training systems shall depend on innovation, diversification of educational programmes and substantial financing of education.

The Government of the Republic of Namibia spends 25% of the total National Budget on Education, making it one of the countries in Africa to spend so much on Education. However, Government discovered that educational outcomes were not commensurate with its spending. The Government through the Ministry of Education has developed internationally acclaimed education reform programme called, **Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP)**. This fifteen years programme that is being implemented in three phases of five years, aims to reform the entire education system. It is now making tangible contribution to the improvement of education quality.

In particular, innovations are taking place in curriculum design; teaching methodology; textbooks development; and examination and assessment. Innovations are addressing different aptitudes, needs and requirements of learners. Therefore, the importance of relevant and of a diversified Curriculum cannot be overemphasized. Teaching methods should address the pace of learning of different learners. For example, remedial education is being applied to slow learners in order to promote the acquisition of fundamental skills of writing, reading and numeracy. The dearth of textbooks in many of our schools is a matter of great concern. Textbooks development is, therefore, receiving urgent attention. Reform of examinations and assessment techniques is ongoing. Cognitive knowledge;

comprehension skills; mathematical reasoning; social competencies and motor skills need to be measured accurately.

In Namibia, the National Institute of Educational Development (NIED) is spearheading innovations in education. The Institute is responsible for curriculum research and development, textbooks development, staff training, headship development and language research, among others.

I have alluded to the challenge Commonwealth governments face in the financing of education and training under the condition of economic recession. Under such conditions Commonwealth governments should be against cutting education budgets. In particular, Commonwealth governments should not be tempted to impose or increase school fees. In addition, the plight of out-of-school and unemployed youth should be addressed by implementing comprehensive youth skills development programmes, as I said before. This is to prevent the unemployed and out of school youth from becoming a destabilising force in our countries. It is against this background that Namibia has further established the National Training Authority (NTA) to spearhead Vocational Education and Training on the basis of Public-Private Partnership. A training levy is being implemented to mobilise additional resources for skills development to enhance vocational education and training in the country.

I have focused on the learner because international meetings tend to emphasize more the structures, processes and programmes of education rather than the most important ingredients, the people.

My aim is to bring to the fore the object of education, which should at all times be the people. This is the human face of education as complex and as diversified as it may seem. This fact should become the centre of our deliberations. We should keep in mind that education is about people; schooling is about learners and whatever structure, processes and programmes we set up and/or envisage should be anchored on this reality. Such structures, processes and programmes should be geared towards addressing the needs of the people.

Commonwealth Cooperation in education and training

The different needs of our learning populations suggest that as a Commonwealth family we must learn from the experiences of each other. The global uncertainties require us to face them as a community with common destiny. The core values of the Commonwealth, as I said earlier, are mutual understanding, sharing and caring. In this spirit we should work together to promote education and training as the basis for social development, economic growth; peace and stability in the Commonwealth family.

Commonwealth Cooperation and partnerships should build on the experiences of the last fifty years. The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan has been particularly successful. It has promoted student mobility in the Commonwealth. Due to pressure of high unemployment among school drop-outs I would like to suggest that the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation should hold a **Special Conference on Youth Skills Development**. Such a Conference should enable the Commonwealth family to share experiences in this vital sector.

Commonwealth Cooperation in school leadership training is another area for possible future cooperation. Research has demonstrated that school leadership matters to educational outcomes. **Commonwealth Cooperation in School Leadership Training** could be enhanced through institutional collaboration. Leadership exchange programmes may enable school heads to learn from each other.

Another vital area of Commonwealth educational cooperation is through **higher education institutional linkages**. Joint research programmes may be undertaken among Commonwealth Universities. The Association of Commonwealth Universities could serve as a vehicle for Commonwealth higher education cooperation.

The Government of Malaysia by hosting the Seventeenth Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, has demonstrated the spirit of Commonwealth cooperation. The Conference should tap on the Malaysian truly Asia spirit to build strong bridges of cooperation between, among and within the Commonwealth States.

At this juncture allow me to sincerely express my gratitude to the Government and people of Malaysia for sharing their hospitality with us. In the same vein I sincerely thank His Excellency, Mr Kamalesh Sharma, Secretary General of the Commonwealth, for inviting me, from one of the smallest Commonwealth countries, Namibia, to come and share with you my thoughts on the education and training needs of the Commonwealth youth and students.

I wish your Conference a resounding success and I thank you sincerely for your kind attention.

