

29 August 2012
18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers
Opening Ceremony Address by Commonwealth Secretary-General
Kamalesh Sharma

Deputy Prime Minister, Prime Minister Anthony, Minister Bunwaree, Honourable Ministers of Education, Excellencies, distinguished guests and members of the Commonwealth education family.....

It gives me a special pleasure to be taking part in this *18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers* and to welcome all participants.

There can be no question that education is central to all sustainable democratic, social and economic advances. It is pivotal to all that the Commonwealth seeks to achieve. The presence of so many here is testimony to our understanding of the crucial importance to our societies of education; it demonstrates in a very immediate and unequivocal way our commitment to the cause of education in the Commonwealth.

I pay tribute to the government and people of Mauritius for the splendid welcome they have accorded us, and for the care and planning that have gone into making this conference possible – as well as the forums and other gatherings associated with it.

Discussions and decisions taken here will influence not only how education is undertaken and developed within the Commonwealth, but what the Commonwealth does collectively to raise opportunities for our citizens, and also how our member states can contribute in shaping and advancing shared global development goals for education.

We need to see education in the Commonwealth comprehensively, taking the broadest possible view and making the most of the multiple levels of collaboration available in our interwoven web of linkages.

Many points of connection and intersection are represented in this room; these cross-connections can multiply. Our Commonwealth world of education is exceptionally rich and deep. This is borne out in the *Directory of Commonwealth Education 2012* newly-published by the Commonwealth Consortium for Education and funded by the Commonwealth Foundation. Most of you will have received copies of this directory – or will be receiving one soon. It reflects the exceptional commitment and contribution of so many in the sphere of Commonwealth education.

I doubt that there is any other field of endeavour in the Commonwealth that is so well served by civil society organisations, professional associations and other partners. This is an unmatched resource and shows the potential for us to achieve even more impressive outcomes and contributions.

Globally, rapid advances in technology, economic transformation, and the cusp of change in the agenda for development and education, combine with a tide in the overall reform of our Commonwealth that is already well underway to make this a watershed *Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers*.

We are re-evaluating the way in which we work together on education in the Commonwealth because we want to achieve more collectively and to maximise the possibilities and reach of collaboration and cooperation. We must think beyond what can be achieved from a desk when we have at our disposal the resources of the worldwide web, the internet and cloud technology and, by all these means, exchanges and partnerships that can be created. Contemporary developments in communications technology can help bind Commonwealth education into an interactive network so that information is accessible to all, valuable knowledge becomes shared, good practices become common property, and alliances and partnerships can be forged.

It is with this central idea in mind that we have created the *Commonwealth Connects* portal, which is now ready to use in transforming the way in which we collaborate on education in the Commonwealth. The prospects which open up through a shared online workspace for governments, organisations, specialists, professionals and communities of practice to collaborate on shared areas of interest and goals are enormous

We at the Commonwealth Secretariat are developing the wherewithal – this contemporary ICT platform. I invite Ministers and officials and our wider Commonwealth education networks to explore and exploit the boundless possibilities that *Commonwealth Connects* offers for taking forward work on a more participative and ambitious scale. Our vision is for an education dimension within *Commonwealth Connects* that will join all of us together in diverse workspaces but to united purpose, sharing literally our common wealth.

Members of our *Commonwealth Connects* team are here in Port Louis to help you register for the shared ministerial work space – and, thanks to a highly commendable initiative of the *Commonwealth of Learning*, every delegation will receive android tablets with an easy-to-use desktop link to the *Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers* online community. The *Commonwealth of Learning* secured the backing of UNICEF and the Hewlett Foundation so that provision of these tablets, which already contain the documents for this conference and many other excellent links to COL's own publications, comes with their compliments.

This underlines my point. It seems the very essence of Commonwealth education in future: based and delivered principally online, focussed more sharply on sharing comparative strengths and contributions of the rich diversity of Commonwealth education partners, and in dynamic ways – especially our non-governmental partners – and generating greater impact as a result. This is the Commonwealth delivering to its citizens in a 21st Century way. Our successes in the past are without question. Now, we must sustain success through innovation and contemporary tools, especially when a comfortable majority of our total population of two billion Commonwealth citizens is under the age of thirty in an organisation getting ever younger.

In Mauritius, we move Commonwealth collaboration to these new, more immediate and inclusive methods of co-working. And in doing so, we must all be realistic about the constraints of resources available to the Secretariat, and conscious that our Heads of Government have directed us to concentrate on areas in which the Commonwealth is able to make a significant difference and impact. Our leaders have recognised that an accumulation of mandates without clear strategic focus has resulted in our attempting to engage too broadly in ways that are often less than ideal in impact. The current exercise of developing a leaner and more effective strategic plan for the Commonwealth Secretariat can be accompanied by a more projectised approach. By this I mean that in place of the continuous work programmes of the past, we can envisage bringing together teams with expertise drawn from a range of partner organisations in addressing tasks within prescribed time frames and to a particular end. When the project is done, we learn and look at other priorities.

Providing this sort of service should be a function of the Secretariat. So too should be the on-going servicing and policy support to the *Commonwealth Education Ministers Conference* to the best of our ability, together with the associated Forums - on this occasion for Youth,

Stakeholders, Teachers and Post-Secondary and Higher Education Leaders - that feed into it. They are important tributaries that enrich and nourish the stream. It is a core purpose of the Secretariat to deliver effective intergovernmental meetings of this kind, and that should continue.

We also hope that, in consultation with those represented here, we will see the emergence of thematically tailored workspaces within *Commonwealth Connects* that can collectively constitute an *Education Hub* for the Commonwealth. Each workspace can be operated by designated managers, with the assistance of operational support from the Secretariat. This promises to open a new frontier of joint Commonwealth striving, interconnection and partnership.

The process underway of deciding how and where the Secretariat's intergovernmental resources should be deployed – and setting it within the wider context of engagement by the Commonwealth family as a whole – has brought home in a most striking way the richness of Commonwealth institutions and organisations that serve education. Primary, secondary, tertiary education as well as technical and professional training all benefit from one or more bodies that help promote best practice and the continual raising of standards.

There are the *Commonwealth of Learning*, the *Commonwealth Education Trust*, the *Association of Commonwealth Universities* - and the projects they run such as on a variety of Open Education Resources, the *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*, the *Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan*, the *Centre for Commonwealth Education* at Cambridge University, work on gender equality in education and encouraging school attendance for girls – these are flagships of education in the Commonwealth, and the alumni of some of these programmes play key roles across the Commonwealth in a wide range of disciplines, including in education.

And there are many other Commonwealth accredited organisations including the *Council for Education in the Commonwealth*, the *Commonwealth Consortium for Education*, the *Commonwealth Advisory Council for Teacher Mobility, Recruitment and Education* – all these and more, I hope, will wish to play a part and make their distinctive contribution.

Meetings such as these show the Commonwealth at its best. Important though new methods of engagement are, there can be no substitute for face-to-face interaction when Ministers, officials and other interested

partners and contributors are able to consult, consider ways forward and identify future collaboration.

How the agenda of Ministerial meetings is carried forward and implemented will also need to be considered by Ministers. In future, these aspects need to be seen far more in the context of all available partners in the global Commonwealth education community or with new international partners, beyond a mandate to the Commonwealth Secretariat. Possibilities could include what our member states are doing within their own regions. Our hosts, for example, are closely involved with initiatives in SADC and with the African Union proposal of a pan-African University.

Excellencies, Ministers and distinguished guests, as 2015 approaches, we are mindful of the progress made by many countries towards education-related *Millennium Development Goals* and *Education For All* targets, and also of the gaps that remain. These internationally agreed goals for education have had a profound impact on the focus of international assistance and national policy. The post-2015 development framework, in planning for which the UN has recently set up a high level working group, is likely to have a similar impact. Therefore it is important that the Commonwealth identify our education priorities and ensure that they remain high on the global agenda. We must ensure the Commonwealth's voice is heard as the new global framework for development, including education, is developed.

The Secretariat's engagement with the youth of the Commonwealth is being enhanced. Meanwhile, we are also redoubling our efforts in the direction of Sport for Development and Peace and the recommendations, which embrace the young, of the *Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding*. We work at the potential for education in a rounded and holistic way.

I look forward to what I am sure will be lively and constructive discussion over the coming days as to what should be the primary areas of focus for us all and the means by which we can best utilise Commonwealth solidarity and connections. As we saw when UNESCO adopted the *Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol* and with the recently concluded Memorandum of Understanding between UNESCO and COL on advancing Open Education Resources globally, collective influence and joint action by the Commonwealth, which encompasses most of the variety of the world as a whole, can be very effectively deployed in

helping to drive forward positive commitment from the international community.

Thought out programmes emerging from this conference will help lift educational opportunities for Commonwealth citizens. The benefits which flow from that, in terms of the foundations of democracy, social progress and inclusive economic growth, lie at the very heart of our national goals and aspiration. Education is indeed the lynchpin of all that the Commonwealth seeks to achieve. There are so many here who share that view and are willing to contribute individually and collectively. The Secretariat will play its part.

Deputy Prime Minister, Prime Minister, Ministers, distinguished guests, thank you for your indulgence. I wish us success at this conference and as we carry forward our work together over coming months and years.