

Message from the Commonwealth Consortium for Education to Commonwealth Heads of Government, meeting in Malta November 2005

EDUCATION IS OF THE HIGHEST PRIORITY TO THE COMMONWEALTH WITH A CRUCIAL ROLE TO PLAY IN BRIDGING DIVIDES.

“We affirm that education, whether formal or informal, is central to development in any society and is of the highest priority to the Commonwealth. In an increasingly divided and insecure world, education must play a crucial role for people, both young and old, for them to optimise their opportunities and to bridge divides”. (Commonwealth Heads of Government, Aso Rock Declaration, Abuja, December 2003)

1. The Commonwealth Consortium for Education¹ welcomes the choice of *Networking the Commonwealth for Development* as the theme for the Malta Summit. Connections and contacts between governments, institutions and peoples lie at the heart of Commonwealth relations.
2. The advent of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has opened up fresh opportunities for contact and co-operation for development. Those having access to modern ICTs can much more easily than hitherto keep abreast of current events across the globe and interact with friends and colleagues in other countries. To those of us working in Commonwealth professional and voluntary organisations these developments offer new possibilities of engaging the interest and involvement of individuals and groups working for Commonwealth development, wherever based. E-mail and the internet have made possible entirely new ways of working.
3. Many parts of the Commonwealth are however still poorly connected to the main hubs of global information and international activity. Differential access to the ICTs can widen the ‘digital divide’ in the short term. The Commonwealth governments should therefore pursue a three-prong strategy of
 - according priority to longer-term investment in infrastructure, including human resource capacities, for ICT in its less developed member countries. Such infrastructure should include a supportive policy framework for ICTs, something that many developing countries still lack
 - using their influence in international forums to ensure that in the medium term user-friendly international protocols are framed and adopted to ensure that developing country access to hardware and software is not impeded by costly and restrictive licensing requirements imposed by suppliers. The World Summit on Information Systems in Tunis affords one such opportunity
 - affording resource-poor countries, on request, access to technical facilities and networks in the short term to make their voices better heard in international consultations and negotiations.
4. In developing pan-Commonwealth policies and capacity in the ICT area advantage should be taken of experience and resources available in the private and business sector, and in civil society as well as in Governments. The various interest groups and potential contributors to a strategy of ‘networking the Commonwealth for development’ should themselves be supported in forming networks for the purpose.

Education Development and the Malta Agenda

5. The CHOGM agenda is closely linked with the development of formal and informal education at all levels. Education provides the essential underpinning for realising Commonwealth values of development, democracy, human rights, peace and security. Heads of Government recognised at Aso Rock in 2003 that education development is crucial for overcoming divides in the Commonwealth. Such divides include the ‘digital divide’. Education has a major part to play in equipping the rising generations of young Commonwealth citizens with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to master the new technologies and to apply them to the betterment of their societies.

¹ The Commonwealth Consortium for Education (CCfE) groups 22 pan-Commonwealth civil society bodies working for development in education, youth and culture. Its creation in 2001 was in part a response to Commonwealth Governments’ call for the formation of sectoral groups among voluntary and professional organisations. It thus exemplifies the CHOGM theme of ‘Networking the Commonwealth for Development’. The Consortium has recently completed a report, *Implementing the Commonwealth Edinburgh Action Plan for Education: the Way Forward*, for the Secretariat. It advocates a better concerting of effort by all the various partners in the six Action Areas.

6. Universities and colleges in the Commonwealth have been major contributors through their R and D work to development and application of ICTs, and have been in the vanguard of efforts to put them at the service of social and economic development. This has included promoting the use of distance learning to enhance education opportunity, a field where Commonwealth universities enjoy particular renown. The Commonwealth's leading role in this area has been enhanced by the work of its unique specialist agency, the Commonwealth of Learning. COL, working with modest resources, has done pioneering work on the use of distance learning for education development. Its current programmes go beyond the education sector and address ways to put technology at the service of achieving the MDGs.

We believe that any credible Commonwealth strategy to develop ICT capacity should involve augmenting substantially the resources at COL's disposal.

7. The new technologies can assist the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in education, and education progress more generally in several ways

- promoting access to education for marginalised learners who for a variety of reasons – geographical, economic, social, cultural cannot reach schools for full-time enrolment. Girls and women, who bear the brunt of domestic and caring tasks, can be helped in particular
- helping to train teachers on the job so that their services are not lost to schools while they have professional upgrading and refreshment. Accelerated training for new entrants to teaching
- improving quality of education by making available better designed materials and programmes giving pupils and students access to a wider range of academic resources
- enabling schools to enlarge students' horizons through establishment of international links
- strengthening education management by improved information analysis and data availability.

8. The Commonwealth as a whole is far from achieving the Millennium Goals in education, namely the attainment of universal primary schooling (UPE) and of gender parity in primary and secondary school enrolments. Many individual member countries have reached these targets but the collective deficits in UPE and gender parity among Commonwealth member states in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa amount to about two thirds of the global shortfall. The gender parity Goal was set for 2005, but the international community and the Commonwealth have failed to reach this early UN target. Successive Global Monitoring Reports on Education for All have made it abundantly clear that many Commonwealth countries are also in danger of missing the UPE target in 2015.

Major efforts will be needed by member countries individually, and by the Commonwealth collectively, if the MDGs in education are to be met. Networking has an important part to play:

- Networking by the Commonwealth with international and regional agencies like UNESCO, World Bank, Association for Development of Education in Africa, NEPAD and the African Union, to ensure that progress is made and the promised resources for countries with coherent EFA plans are forthcoming from the international community
- Commonwealth-supported inter-country networking to share experiences of good professional practice and creative responses to commonly faced challenges of educational development
- Better co-ordination of the resources and efforts of Commonwealth inter-governmental and civil society agencies in pursuit of efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

9. We believe the Commonwealth should be dynamic in capitalising on its strengths. Our report for the Commonwealth Secretariat underlines the opportunities in education, where infrastructure is so well developed: the Secretariat and COL among IGOs; Commonwealth Institute/ Centre for Commonwealth Education and the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan as supporting public programmes; and an array of professional and voluntary organisations in civil society. At regional level established universities and examination bodies, with mainly Commonwealth membership, thrive. Overall impact is diminished by fragmentation of effort, so the challenge is to harness and mobilise this great potential.

We see opportunities for mobilising these diverse programmes and efforts behind the Commonwealth's commitment to the MDGs and the Education Action Plan endorsed by Commonwealth Education Ministers. Similar scope may exist in other sectors. The Malta summit can provide the needed impetus.