

Statement from a Civil Society Workshop in the Commonwealth People's Forum

Convened by Commonwealth Consortium for Education and City of Manukau Education Trust

Education for Transformation

1. Education has a central role and responsibility in social transformation, in the promotion of Commonwealth values of respect and understanding, and in assisting communities to confront the challenges of climate change and sustainable development.
2. Attainment of each of the Millennium Development Goals and their associated targets for the alleviation of poverty requires a strong education input from both civil society and government. In every country, rich or poor, education lays the necessary foundations for establishing good governance, democratic participation and human rights. It provides the means for empowering disadvantaged and marginalised groups and promoting their inclusion in society. Education is the passport to participation in the knowledge economy for the individual, and to improving productivity at the local and national level. This underlines the need for a multi-sectoral approach to development.
3. The recent rapid progress in expanding primary school intake made by several Commonwealth member countries is most welcome. But we are concerned that enrolment data often mask problems of high drop-out, and serious inequality in access opportunities for different social groups and communities. Moreover, poor quality of education, and the consequent low learning achievement by pupils, frequently negates the purpose of expanded school provision. Strong leadership and imaginative policies in support of greater equity and inclusiveness must be high on the agenda if obstacles to access for the poorest and most disadvantaged are to be overcome.
4. Despite recent achievements, many Commonwealth countries seem likely to fail to achieve the MDG targets for 2015, having already missed the target for gender parity in primary and secondary schooling by 2005. In some countries lack of access to education has been exacerbated by conflict, and the scourge of HIV/AIDS has had a serious impact on pupils and families, teachers and schools. Renewed commitment to attainment of the MDG education targets, and to sustaining that achievement thereafter, is required, with more developed Commonwealth countries assisting those furthest from the targets to achieve them.
5. Education for transformation requires especially that Commonwealth countries work actively, intentionally and proactively to address gender equity. In most contemporary contexts this calls for special support for education of women and girls, who have so often been deprived of opportunities for personal development through learning. Although discrimination against women is often rooted in social and cultural attitudes and practices that are slow to change, there is ample international experience of successful intervention measures that can make a real impact on the problem.
6. Basic education development should be seen in a wider framework than the two education MDGs. The Education for All (EFA) goals promulgated in Dakar in 2000 also commit governments to improve the quality of education, extend pre-school education and adult literacy, and strengthen provision of skills for young people and adults. The Commonwealth's focus should be on this broader agenda since the EFA goals are mutually reinforcing, and UPE is unlikely to be achievable without complementary progress towards attaining the other goals.
7. We ask Heads of Government to consider attentively and endorse the Cape Town Message from Commonwealth Ministers of Education to CHOGM. In particular, we support the Ministers' plea that member countries should adopt a holistic approach to education development. This implies

- A broader interpretation of Education for All than narrow focus just on the MDGs.
 - Reshaping the interactions between school, family and community, and between education, health and nutrition, and productive work.
 - Recognition that Education for All is inclusive in focus. It involves provision of lifelong learning opportunities for all age groups. It also means facilitating education and training geared to the needs of learners of all levels of ability or disability.
 - Encouragement of a wide range of different modes of learning and skill acquisition including independent study, open learning, and on the job training in enterprises.
 - Recognition of the interdependence of the primary, secondary and tertiary cycles of education and of the need for balanced education development.
 - Acknowledgment of the contribution that secondary and tertiary education play both in strengthening the drive for EFA, and also in generating the knowledge, attitudes and skills required for national development.
 - Increased investment in vocational training, and science and technology (including information and communications technology) education, including targeted provision for women, youth, and less advantaged groups.
8. Education will only flourish when all those with a stake in its success work closely together. Civil society groups of different kinds - community organisations, parents, teacher associations, professional bodies, women and youth groups and the like – have a considerable capacity to contribute to the public education goals set by governments, but encouragement and help from government is needed to release civil society's potential and increase its capacity to carry out these responsibilities. Equally, civil society partnerships with the local private sector and with international firms and agencies can be productive.
 9. Commonwealth educational exchanges, associations of Commonwealth professionals, and linkages between schools, colleges and local authorities offer fruitful opportunities for learning from one another and about each other. They are a valuable means of realising human potential but require much enhanced public support. Commonwealth governments could demonstrate their recognition of the value of education interchange by substantially increasing funding provision for the Commonwealth Foundation.
 10. We particularly welcome the emphasis in the Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Education and Understanding, *Civil paths to peace*, on the role and responsibilities of the education system with regard to the promotion of the Commonwealth values of respect and understanding towards people of different culture, language, faith, and social group. We recommend that Heads of Government should invite Education Ministers to consider an expanded role for education in promoting social cohesiveness and respect for cultural diversity, and to report back to CHOGM in 2009, according priority to this as one of the thematic groups that Education Ministers envisaged in their Cape Town Communique.
 11. The Commonwealth's infrastructure for co-operation is better developed in education than in any other sector. It includes strong civil-society professional and voluntary organisations, and co-operative institutions and programmes, especially the Commonwealth of Learning and the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan. We recommend that the Commonwealth marks the 50th anniversary of the First Commonwealth Education Conference at Oxford in 1959 by undertaking a review of experience in Commonwealth education co-operation in the last half century and by proactive efforts to identify fresh opportunities for future beneficial collaboration.