



Agenda for Actions by Civil Society

Crossing the Education Bridges in the Commonwealth

by

Dr. Rajesh Tandon
President, PRIA &
UNESCO Chair on Community-based Research and Social
Responsibility in Higher Education

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PRIA

42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi – 110062

Tel. : +91-11-29960931/32/33 Fax : +91-11-2996 55183

Website: www.pria.org; -mail: info@pria.org

The 18th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers in Mauritius during August 27-31, 2012 is focused upon “Education in the Commonwealth: Bridging the Gap”¹. This is an important juncture in human history to examine the status of education around the Commonwealth, review the progress made so far towards achieving internationally agreed goals in education, assess the gaps in accomplishing those goals, understand their underlying causes and elaborate on key strategies that need to be pursued if the gaps have to be filled. While there are many different stakeholders whose responsible actions would specially be required if these gaps have to be bridged, I would specially address my reflections on what the civil society in the Commonwealth should focus upon. National and local governments in Commonwealth countries must face up to these challenges of meeting internationally agreed goals; inter-governmental bodies like Commonwealth Secretariat must not shy away from performing its own responsibilities. The Commonwealth Foundation, as a platform for the civil society in the Commonwealth, needs to embrace a more strategic role in advancing the education agenda in the Commonwealth.

Goals & Gaps

The various internationally agreed goals for the promotion of education have been broadly clustered into two MDGs (Goals 2 & 3) and six EFA goals². MDG Goal 2 focuses on primary education enrolments; MDG Goal 3 focuses on women’s empowerment, and hence targets removal of gender disparities at primary and secondary level. Progress in Education for All was reviewed in Dakar in 2000, and the six goals were more concretely established; of course, there was an acknowledgement that not much progress had been made during the decade of 1990s. Interestingly enough, both MDGs and EFA³ goals were set in 2000, latter in Dakar during World Education forum and the former in New York during the special Millennium Assembly of the United Nations. And, even more interestingly, they set for themselves 2015 as the deadline for achieving these goals.

¹ www.commonwealthfoundation.com

² For a fuller review of the status of progress of these goals and attendant challenges, refer to “Education in the Commonwealth” 2012 Report prepared by Trey Menefee and Mark Bray (m.bray@hku.hk) specially for the 18th CCEM

³ See WCEFA 1990 a&b as relevant documents from Jomtien conference on Education for All.

Many recent studies, reports and documents have analysed the progress towards these goals, and generally predicted unlikely achievement of all MDGs, as measured against targets set⁴. Likewise, progress on EFA goals is also analysed with limited chances of full achievements⁵. The Report prepared by Prof Mark Bray for this conference does a wonderful job of presenting detailed analysis across countries and regions of the Commonwealth with respect to progress till date, and likely achievements till 2015, of the two MDG goals and the six EFA goals.

It is clear from these various analyses that some critical aspects of established goals with respect to education will not be met by 2015:

- Enrolments in entry level have been impressive in most countries, but high drop-out rates by exit level of primary education are cause for concern
- Enrolments at secondary levels are lagging, and gender disparity continues in the same
- More than half the target for achievements in reduction of adult illiteracy shall not be met
- Progress in vocational skills is focused on urban/industrial livelihood options in formal sectors of economy

Many of these analyses suggest several reasons for somewhat disappointing trends. These include paucity of investments, inadequate capacities of teachers, absence of focused public policies and continued reforms of education sectors⁶.

It is interesting to recall that EFA goals were defined in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 in terms of '*access, equity, learning and partnerships*'. It was argued then that critical challenges facing education were expansion of access, ensuring equity in enrolments, enhancing quality of learning and building partnerships with various stakeholders---students, parents, teachers, civil society, private sector, media, etc. Let us assess the underlying causes of these gaps in achievements in respect of these Jomtien principles.

⁴ "Keeping the Promise: United to Achieve MDGs" (See United Nations 2010) for the latest global review of progress towards MDGs

⁵ Review of EFA has been conducted through EFA Global Monitoring Reports regularly and are available from UNESCO Institute of Statistics

⁶ These Issues have been regularly raised in reviews of EFA since Darkar (2000) and most recently in the Global Monitoring reports

There has been considerable progress on **access** throughout the world, and Commonwealth too; greater access to primary education is visible. However, there are some 'zones of exclusion' as Prof Bray argues; at the core of this issue of exclusion, is not the absence of demand; all parents, around the world, want to 'educate' their children, and are willing to make sacrifices towards the same. The problem is with weak or non-existent 'supply' of education. Supply of education weakens in distant locations, small habitations, ethnic minority communities, conflict zones, migrant families, informal urban settlements, and patriarchal social settings. These 'zones of exclusion' have been well documented for long, yet public programmes have failed to address the weaknesses in supply. As a result, following the logic of the market, new suppliers of education—from pre-primary to post-secondary levels---have been mushrooming in most countries of the Commonwealth; the present systems of regulation doesn't even take cognizance of these new private suppliers of education; hence, their quality suffers greatly.

The problem of **equity** is linked to quality of supply of education. Quality is the most serious issue facing all educational systems throughout the Commonwealth (including Britain). Uneven **quality** is evident as children enrolled in primary education and adults in literacy classes do not know the basics; there is no focus on learning outcomes, and hence, there is no accountability for learning. The phenomenon of poor quality spreads to post-secondary levels of education too.

Absence of **learning** and poor quality of education in the Commonwealth is largely due to several inter-related phenomenon:

- Insufficient public investment in high quality basic education for all; educational investment is neither increasing in proportion to population nor growth in GDP in most countries;
- 'Off-loading' responsibility for investments to the households and the market-based solutions; many countries have been encouraging, directly through policy or indirectly through practices of exclusion, growth in private provision of education; education as a public good is reduced to basic levels alone, and equated with enrolments, not learning; families and parents are expected to take full responsibility for ensuring learning and progress of students, not schools or teachers;

- Inadequate supply of trained, motivated, accountable teachers is a common Commonwealth wide phenomenon; there is shortage of trained teachers; the teaching profession is not attracting enough young talent as compensation levels of teachers and other education providers remain generally low; mechanisms for the local supervision and support to teachers are weak, and parental/community accountability mechanisms are non-existent, thereby perpetuating teacher absenteeism and apathy in many countries⁷;
- In the past decade, major distortions in the practice of educational provisions have been ‘allowed’ to develop; in several developing countries, private schools for middle and elite classes of society have reduced their interest in public schools (which are increasingly meant for the poor only); private tutoring has become so widespread that children and teachers spend more time in private tuition than in actual school; Prof Bray calls it ‘shadow education’⁸ as it parallels the formal system; in some instances, e-learning is being promoted as a panacea, without realizing the need for face-to-face interactions between learners and teachers as an essential element in acquiring and sharpening the learning faculties.

The above are not ‘startling’ new findings or revelations; these have been known for some time. So, the question really is that when countries and governments of the Commonwealth ‘know’ the gaps, and understand the underlying ‘causes’ for the gaps, why are they not acting to ‘bridge’ those gaps?

The answer to this paradox lies in the final principle established in Jomtien—**‘partnerships’**. It has been assumed that education ministries and departments of the national governments alone are going to be able to ensure access, quality and learning in ‘Education for All’. The key stakeholders in this process remain generally marginalised—students and learners, parents and families, teachers and educators, civil society, media and other institutions of education. Where ‘partnerships’ with the private providers have been made, it is generally carried out as if the private provision has nothing to do with the public sector. Education for All has to be the responsibility of all, and ministers and officials responsible for education in the

⁷ Global Campaign on Education (2012) has been raising these issues for some- time; the International Task Force on Teachers for EFA has been set up to address these sets of issues

⁸ Prof Mark Bray has produced an excellent analysis of this business;
www.fe.hku.hk/cerc/publications/monograph no.9

Commonwealth countries must ensure that meaningful and mutually respectful partnerships are built at local, national and pan-Commonwealth levels.

This Stakeholders' Forum is an excellent example of what needs to happen at local, national and transnational levels regularly and systematically⁹.

Gaps in Goals

While the foregoing suggests areas for future work in respect to achieving the MDG and EFA goals, it is also important for civil society to pay attention to those issues which may not have been adequately covered in the goals themselves, specially since these goals were established more than a decade ago.

First, the fragmentation and divisions in the ministries, departments and agencies responsible for planning and delivery of education remain unchanged. Notice that 'education for all' doesn't focus on 'education throughout the life-cycle'. It is somehow construed that primary (and may be secondary) education and some literacy is enough for most people in the developing world; post-secondary education can be taken care of somehow, at the initiative of the student and her parents? There is a need to bring in a clearly articulated framework of *life-long learning*, since lives of learners are not compartmentalized into departments. Such a life-long learning framework has been adopted by many countries of European Union, and the Commonwealth governments can be encouraged to learn from the same.

Second, the life-long perspective can bring the focus to post-secondary, tertiary and vocational education as well. Many governments in the Commonwealth actually 'woke up' to the need for focusing their attention to post-secondary education only recently. Even then, the focus on vocational education (VET) is delivered in isolation; but, how is this integrated into primary, secondary and adult education trajectories?

Third, much of the current push for skills development is aimed at developing and certifying those skills that are 'employable' in the formally organised sectors of economy. These skills are those needed in urban/industrial economic entities and office complexes. This is why the main sponsors of such conferences are those who

⁹ See Statement to Ministers from Stakeholders Forum to 18th CCEM; www.commonwealth.com

focus skill development in English language and computers —Microsoft, HP, British Council. What about skill development and certification for vendors? How is skill development of artist, musicians, agriculturists, rickshaw-pullers, etc to be undertaken? As a large proportion of people in the Commonwealth earn their livelihood in informal sectors of the economy (which is growing in countries like UK too), how will their educational requirements be addressed?¹⁰ Likewise, how will the provisions for ‘re-learning’ new skills by mid-career people taken care of, who are finding their previous skills increasingly irrelevant in the changing economic and social contexts? It is a complete myth that quick skill development programmes and new TVET projects would make out-of-school youth suddenly and permanently employable.

Fourth, there is now a general recognition for the growth in the service sectors and the knowledge economy world-wide; many Commonwealth countries themselves have been making policies to promote knowledge economy. Expansion of knowledge economy in a given society depends greatly on supply of trained manpower, mostly at post-secondary and tertiary levels. However, there is not adequate attention to post-secondary and higher education in these goals (or their frameworks); should these countries not aim to enhance enrolments in higher education and create policies, institutions and investments for provision of high quality higher education? Should ‘education for all’ campaigns, stop at ‘basic education for all and tertiary education for a few’? How are higher education institutions linked to other educational institutions in professional and organic manner?¹¹ Post-secondary education can support basic education, and vice-versa; why is this approach not a part of the goals? How is higher education acting in a socially responsible manner? How is knowledge and learning linked to the lives and practices of the people it aims to serve?

Fifth, there is the larger question of what education would ‘empower’ the people to be effective, productive and active citizens of their societies and the world? Global

¹⁰ The World Bank has produced a new report on skill development “Education in a Changing World: Flexibility, Skills & employability” which primarily argues for flexible provisions for skill development in the changing market economy. Bernie Lovergrove of ASPBAE has offered a thoughtful critique of the same (July 2012); UNESCO has argued, in the recent 3rd World Shanghai Congress on TVET that it should be viewed from the equity and transformative lens as well

¹¹ Asia Pacific High Level Expert Meeting held in Bangkok during May 2012 called for shaping a new vision of education, going beyond EFA; report available with UNESCO Bangkok and Korean Association for Adult Education

economy has changed dramatically since 2000, when these goals were established; Asian countries are 'booming' economically; BRICS countries and others have joined G20 in global governance; American and European economies are facing recession, unemployment and confusion; supply of labour force will increase dramatically in Africa, somewhat in Asia, and decline in Europe/north America in the next two decades. In the face of such shifts, what is the point of education if cannot provide livelihood, cannot enable citizens to make sense of the world, or enable them to hold their governments, political and business leaders AND bankers to account? These goals have not come to terms with the changing realities like--- more Indians (nearly 800 million) have mobile phones than toilets (about 400 million) today! In a world of such dramatic shifts, education for employment may well be a myth; education for preparation of citizens to navigate a world through integrity and compassion may well be the most pressing requirement in 2030?

Agenda for Civil society

In light of the foregoing, it is critical that civil society in the Commonwealth, and beyond, figures out what to do and how to do it. This becomes even more urgent in light of the fact that the Commonwealth secretariat is proposing to abandon its focus on education in the next phase (beyond 2013)¹². It is even more pressing as the global discussions on post-2015 are already in full swing, and many more actors, pressure groups and interests are engaging with this process now than was the case either for EFA in Jomtien in 1990 and Dakar in 2000, or for that matter MDGs in New York in 2000.

1. Education Matters

It is understandable that various formations of civil society in different countries have proliferated to work on a wide range of issues over the past decade. Important as all those issues are, it is critical to recognise that education is the building block of human endeavours—education matters. Education matters in socio-economic inclusion, gender justice, environmental

¹² See article by Peter Williams “Critical Champions: Civil Society and Commonwealth Education”, The Round Table, December 2009, also the Publication of Commonwealth Foundation specially updated in 2012 “Educational Cooperation” Peter Williams & James Urwick (eds.)

protection, green and sustainable development, livelihoods and peace¹³. If civil society doesn't keep its sights on education, the present momentum of the market will use education to prepare consumers, workers and zombies, not citizens.

2. *Coalitions Matter*

The various streams and trajectories of civil society must come together to form coalitions; *the stakeholder forum* in Mauritius during the 18th CCEM was not really a stakeholder forum. Teachers were meeting separately in another venue; youth were doing something else somewhere. A conference of post-secondary/higher education folks was debating issues of their interest, oblivious of other stakeholders. All this was happening in Mauritius during the same week, but there was no conversation amongst them. It is critical that stakeholders in education are viewed more widely and holistically; their coalition-building will be challenging and full of conflicts and contestations; but, then that is what seems to be required at this stage?

3. *Inclusion Matters*

The coalition of civil society needs to be inclusive; there has been a recent tendency for large international, better-resourced NGOs to become the coalition themselves, without necessarily making an effort to bring hitherto 'missing voices' in civil society. The Commonwealth Foundation has been struggling with this challenge for sometime now. The Commonwealth Consortium for Education¹⁴ is a functional platform to engage with the Commonwealth Secretariat and governments; yet, most membership of this Consortium is UK-based. It has been publishing and disseminating much useful materials; yet, it needs to find creative ways to include many other civil society actors and voices which are in the countries, in the sub-regions, and even beyond. Building linkages with civil society platforms on EFA active beyond the Commonwealth will be strategic as well.

¹³ See Statement to Ministers from Stakeholder Forum in Mauritius during 18th CCEM

¹⁴ The Commonwealth Consortium for Education as well as the Directory of Commonwealth Education 2012 published by it show how UK-centric these mechanisms still are.

4. *Goals Matter*

Many civil society voices have been critical of these various goals; in some ways, the goals tend to be narrowly defined; many EFA goals were further narrowed when interjected into MDGs. Now, the debates around the world focus on post-2015 goals. Sustainable development goals cannot be actualized without concurrent educational goals. Therefore, civil society coalitions of the Commonwealth must find ways to engage with current process of reviewing the progress of achievement of goals, as well as reconstruction of new ones. It is imperative that civil society continues to demand that national governments and international agencies redeem their efforts towards a 'full and fair' accomplishment of EFA/MGD goals established 15 years ago¹⁵; unless that happens by 2015, the future credibility of goals and goal-making will be questioned. The Commonwealth Foundation must utilize its unique niche to facilitate convening of inclusive civil society voices in interfacing with governments and international agencies towards this end far more strategically.

5. *Learning Matters*

The challenge for education throughout the Commonwealth, indeed the world over, is the challenge of learning. The current obsession with 'rights to education' must be transformed in the civil society to '*Right To Learn*'¹⁶. Nearly three decades ago, in March 1985, the international conference on adult education in Paris gave a call for 'Right To Learn'. That call is more relevant today than ever before; mass efforts at enrolment and supply of education in many developing Commonwealth countries have pushed resources and attention away from quality and learning outcomes; pursuit of quality is now a private effort (through tuitions, private schooling, international edu-migration, etc); the inequities in education are no longer through access,

¹⁵ See ASPBAE's campaign materials emphasizing the need to focus on EFA goals "Persuading Powers" 2011

¹⁶ The declaration on 'Right to Learn' was made during the Fourth UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education, Paris, March 1985

but through quality of learning. Hence, the civil society attention must focus on **'right to learn'** for all, in all stages of the life cycle.

New issues and new ways of addressing old issues need to be innovated. Innovation requires an eco-system; at the heart of that eco-system is learning to make mistakes; without risks, there is no innovation. How do we come together to create such an eco-system in our societies and institutions so that creativity, learning, questioning and risk-taking is stimulated and supported?

The civil society in the Commonwealth needs to re-call history of the Commonwealth, and its shared values; the spirit of the Commonwealth is essentially that of inclusion—large & small, rich and poor, north & south. Education of the citizens of the Commonwealth is about Education of the Commonwealth. If the world today is facing Crossroads, if models of economic development are unclear, if the hopes of democracy are not being realized, if citizens are not trusting their leaders and institutions, it is because education for a world of difference has not been promoted. Commonwealth of people can provide leadership to explore and create a new world we want.