

# COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION BRIEFING NOTES

*Prepared by the Commonwealth Consortium for Education*

*A grouping of voluntary and professional bodies committed to education development in the Commonwealth*

## NO. 7 COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION CO-OPERATION: ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

### **A Commonwealth of Peoples**

The Commonwealth is often seen as primarily an international organisation. Yet its real essence is that of a community. It is an association of peoples as much as of states or governments.

The Commonwealth's institutional structures are in fact comparatively light. The staffs and budgets of the Secretariat, the Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning, are small in comparison with those of the larger UN agencies or, say, the European Union. But behind the façade of the inter-governmental machinery is a wide network of semi-formal and informal relationships and linkages which represent the strength of the Commonwealth and are the channels through which co-operation finds its best expression.

The ties that bind the Commonwealth are partly personal ones of kinship, resulting from earlier migration of fathers, daughters, cousins and later intermarriage between migrants and the local population. Consequently many Commonwealth countries now have a multi-ethnic population with links to many different Commonwealth countries of origin. Partly the ties consist of shared values of respect for human rights, commitment to democratic forms of government, toleration and mutual respect for differences of background and belief. And in part they are based on a common heritage of institutional forms and practices, elements of a common culture. It has been said that the Commonwealth is bound together by the three golden threads of Language, Law and Learning.

From its very beginnings forty years ago the Commonwealth was clear-sighted enough to recognise where its centre of gravity lay. Alongside the official Secretariat that was established in 1965, the Commonwealth Foundation was created in the same year to encourage and support civil-society links - a radical innovation for its time.

### **Civil Society in the Commonwealth**

Civil society consists of all those groups in society that are situated beyond the bounds of the state, the armed forces and the corporate sector. It embraces a whole spectrum of self-regulating institutions including faith organisations, trade unions and co-operatives, professional associations, community organisations, welfare bodies, women's and youth groups, political and protest movements, recreational and sporting institutions, clubs and societies, and the media. Semi-autonomous bodies like universities, despite their heavy reliance on government funding, are normally considered part of civil society.

Commonwealth countries are generally moving along the road to becoming pluralistic societies where many

different groups in society play a part in socio-economic development. They have a long tradition of encouraging voluntary action, and where appropriate forming partnerships between government and non-official bodies to provide public services. Of course the degree of state centralisation in any particular country has ebbed and flowed reflecting the changing political climate. But the general direction of political change in Commonwealth countries has been towards democratic participation and away from military and one-party rule.

Even where civil society's role as a valuable partner in pluralistic democratic states is recognised, its position in society may not go unchallenged. Precisely because civil-society organisations represent countervailing sources of influence, balancing to some extent the power of the state, they may attract scrutiny and criticism. On the one hand they engage increasingly in advocacy, attempting to influence public policy and the disposition of state resources in directions they find desirable. This is never particularly comfortable for the authorities. It can arouse particular resentment if it is apparent that civil society bodies are not representative of their members' views and interests and do not themselves practise the democratic accountability they preach to governments. In other cases local NGOs may attract criticism through undue reliance on funding support from outside the country.

The issue of resources is particularly troublesome. The reach of the market is steadily extending into spheres of life that have until now been 'ring-fenced', enabling civil-society organisations to rely on personal commitment and voluntarism, and to avail themselves of the services of staff paid at rates that would be uncompetitive in the market place. But the growth of consumerism, and the increasing tendency to equate time with money, make it more challenging to attract people to undertake poorly remunerated work and responsibility. Recourse to the state for support tends to undermine civil-society's independence; reliance on external sources can undermine an NGO's legitimacy; and philanthropists are in short supply.

On the international scene these trends have tended to widen the capacity gap between large international NGOs that raise millions of pounds annually from the public in industrialised countries for humanitarian relief and development activities on the one hand; and locally based organisations, often small and operating at 'grassroots' level on the other. A complication is that generous (in local terms) salaries offered by the 'internationals' make it more difficult for indigenous bodies to attract good staff.

## The Commonwealth Foundation

### The Commonwealth Foundation

The Foundation was established in 1965 as an intergovernmental organisation resourced by, and reporting to, Commonwealth governments. Its mandate is to strengthen civil society, thereby advancing Commonwealth values and programme priorities related to democracy and good governance, respect for human rights and gender equality, poverty reduction, and sustainable, people-centred development. Its Headquarters is at Marlborough House in London. Its budget is approximately £3m. p.a.

The Foundation's programme is based on working with civil society organisations and professional associations in the Commonwealth. It supports civil society activities that contribute to the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals. It funds inter-country networking (particularly among developing countries), training, capacity-building and information exchange. In particular, it targets activities that strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations in their work on poverty eradication, good governance and sustainable development. The principal vehicle for the Foundation's support of education is its new Culture and Diversity Programme that aims to realise the connections between culture, development and democracy.

Every two years, at the time of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, the Foundation organises civil society events to promote the People's Commonwealth. These include seminars, workshops, exhibitions and cultural performances.

### Civil society engagement with education

Civil society organisations get involved in education delivery in several ways. Even where education is entirely state-run, governing boards and school committees generally have civil society representatives drawn from the among leaders of the local community or representing teachers' and parents' groups. Teachers organisations (trades unions and professional associations) play an important role in education improvement and advocacy. In many countries governments look to local people to mobilise community effort for construction of facilities or to supplement state provision of books and equipment.

At the other end of the spectrum from the state school are independent schools. These may in some cases be businesses belonging to individual proprietors and effectively being part of the private sector of the economy. But in many countries there is civil-society involvement in school provision alongside the state. Not-for-profit faith-based organisations, charitable trusts, or local communities may operate education institutions as a recognised part of the national system.

In many more instances arrangements for partnership between the state and civil society bodies are in place, and the functions of ownership of site and buildings, management, and financing being treated as separate functions and the subject of agreed assignment of responsibility. This church or mosque schools may be funded by government, or state schools may be managed by civil society bodies.

Partnerships with civil society bring certain obvious advantages for Government

- civil society bodies are often closer to the people and the consumers of education, and are an important source of feedback on education requirements and the impact of state provision
- participation of civil society bodies in the conduct of education can mobilise a wider popular identification with, and support for, public policies
- additional resources in money or labour may be tapped that would not be available to government through the tax system. This particularly applies to the commitment of voluntary effort
- civil society is less trammelled by bureaucratic requirements and can respond more quickly and flexibly than government to emerging needs
- civil society can inject variety, experimentation and innovation into state systems that inevitably tend towards standardisation of procedures and provision.

In moving on to consider Commonwealth co-operation in education one can, at the risk of gross oversimplification, identify four principal categories of civil society organisations engaged in such collaborative activity:

1. Locally-based organisations in developing countries. Some of these, like BRAC in Bangladesh or the education secretariat of denominational churches in many African countries, are large-scale operations: but there is a myriad of much smaller NGOs based in single communities and doing local grassroots work. This category includes organisations engaging in advocacy with the support of the Commonwealth Education Fund (see below).
2. Voluntary and charitable bodies in industrialised countries that target their help on particular countries or projects or that engage in school and college linking with schools in Commonwealth developing countries.
3. Large international charities supporting education development, and increasingly engaging in advocacy. Many of them are members of the Global Campaign for Education. Three of them are responsible for managing the Commonwealth Education Fund (CEF) on behalf of the UK Government.
4. Commonwealth associations in the education sector.

The remainder of this Briefing Note focuses first on the CEF (see 3 above); then on Commonwealth associations in education (4 above) and finally considers some of the ways in which civil-society engages with the official Commonwealth.

### The Commonwealth Education Fund (CEF)

CEF was set up in 2002 by the British Government, and funded by it, to mark Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee. It is a unique education advocacy project, collaboratively managed by ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children and is scheduled to operate until 2008. CEF works strategically with civil society in low income Commonwealth countries likely to miss the education and gender "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs), in order to make education a sustained domestic priority and to make public schools work effectively for all children.

#### Activities:

CEF promotes the right to education by ensuring that governments fulfil their commitments through good quality education policies, transparent and accountable financial procedures, and quality education provision that

reaches the most marginalised girls and boys. The programme operates in 16 countries: Bangladesh, Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. CEF focuses on three main workstreams:

\* Strengthening broad-based and democratically-run national education coalitions that have active membership across the country and can effectively channel grassroots voices and experiences into influencing national level policy and practice.

\* Ensuring that financing for education is sufficient to make public schools work for all girls and boys, and that government budgets are effectively targeted and reach where they are most needed.

\* Supporting evidence-based influencing of policy rooted in innovative work that has succeeded in getting excluded children, particularly girls, into public schools.

### **Commonwealth Associations in Education**

Among about 80 Commonwealth civil-society bodies registered with the Commonwealth about a third are active in education, and of these 24 are members of the Commonwealth Consortium for Education whose activities are featured on page 3 of this Briefing Note. More information on the individual Commonwealth civil society bodies in the education sector can be found in the Commonwealth Education Directory being published for the first time by the Consortium for the 16CCEM in Cape Town.

These associations vary considerably in form and function. Some, like the Association of Commonwealth Universities and Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa, have institutional members only; while others are open to individual members. And they vary greatly in size of payroll and budget from those that have 40 or 50 employees to others that work entirely through volunteers. A number of professional associations receive a core budget for overheads from the Commonwealth Foundation, but the Foundation is moving away from this as its preferred form of support.

As their Directory entries make clear, the functions of the Associations vary. All have some kind of representative function engaging in networking among their members and in advocacy with governments and the Commonwealth inter-governmental organisations. Most have information functions for their members and the outside world. A number of them engage in training and capacity building operations and run seminars and workshops. Research and publications are a major part of their work.

The creation of the Commonwealth Teachers' Group (CTG) in December 2006 represents a major reinforcement for this constituency, representing millions of Commonwealth teachers through its own member organisations.

### **Commonwealth Consortium for Education**

The Consortium was founded in 2001 and formally constituted in 2002 as a group of civil-society organisations committed to education in the Commonwealth. It is a voluntary organisation with no paid staff employees. Membership has doubled from the

original 12 members in late 2001 to 24 now. The Consortium received formal accreditation to the Commonwealth in December 2004 and was invited to send Observer delegations to the Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Edinburgh (15CCEM) and Cape Town (16CCEM).

#### **Aims of the Consortium**

- to promote the development of education throughout the Commonwealth
- to contribute views and insights to the formulation of policies on Commonwealth educational cooperation
- to assist Commonwealth inter-Governmental agencies to draw on NGO resources and expertise
- to develop and disseminate models of good practice in education
- to constitute a forum which will promote cooperation by members

#### **Consortium Activities**

##### *Advocacy.*

Submissions to CHOGMs and CCEMs arguing that education development and cooperation in the Commonwealth should be declared a priority. This was achieved through the Aso Rock Declaration in December 2003 and the Valletta CHOGM Communique in 2005.

##### *Project work*

In April 2005 the Consortium completed a major project for the Education Section of the Commonwealth Secretariat on ways to make operational the Edinburgh Action Plan for Education with its six priority action areas (achieving universal primary education, eliminating gender disparity in education, improving quality in education, using open and distance education to overcome barriers, supporting education in difficult circumstances, mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on education). A series of seven workshops was convened by different Consortium members. The final report *Implementing the Edinburgh Action Plan for Education: ways forward* charts the extensive capacity of the Commonwealth in education, explores its comparative advantage, and identifies themes and issues for future collaboration.

##### *Advice*

Following the 15CCEM, the Consortium was invited to be an Observer on the Commonwealth Working Group on Teacher Recruitment leading to active participation in the Group's meetings in Lesotho (February 2004) and Britain (August/ September 2004). It was also attended two of the Commonwealth's mid-term Reviews in 2005

##### *Conferences and meetings on issues of key importance to the Commonwealth.*

The inaugural conference in October 2003, organised in close cooperation with the Commonwealth Teachers Group, addressed *Retention and Mobility of Teachers in the Commonwealth*. Its recommendations to Ministers helped to pave the way for eventual adoption of the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol.

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference in 2006 in Cape Town is *The power of partnerships: strength in friends: exploration of the potential of school and college linking in the Commonwealth*.

- *Networking Commonwealth people for implementing the MDGs in Education* At the Commonwealth People's Forum in Valletta, November 2005
- *Building institutional partnerships in education.* At the Stakeholder Forum in Cape Town December 2006

#### Publications

- ❖ A *Commonwealth Education Calendar* listing forthcoming meetings and other events planned by members and associated organisations is produced every three months and appears on the website.
- ❖ *Commonwealth Education Briefing Notes.* A series of 12 Notes, of which this is one in 2006.
- ❖ A *Commonwealth Education Directory* of which the first edition appeared in 2006.
- ❖ *Implementing the Commonwealth Edinburgh Action Plan: Ways Forward.* 2005

#### Briefing Notes in this series

1. Commonwealth co-operation in education: a profile
2. Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers
3. The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan
4. Commonwealth co-operation in distance learning
5. The Commonwealth and Education for All
6. Gender and education: the Commonwealth dimension
7. Commonwealth education co-operation: role of civil society
8. Education about the Commonwealth
9. Science, technology and mathematics education.
10. Commonwealth student mobility: trends and issues
11. Teacher development and mobility in the Commonwealth
12. School and college linking in the Commonwealth

### Engaging Commonwealth associations in the Commonwealth's education work

As described in this and the other Briefing Notes in the series, the Commonwealth's infrastructure in education is extensive – more so than in any other sector – and this is true of both the 'official' and the 'unofficial' Commonwealth. The potential for fruitful co-operation is becoming increasingly recognised, and a number of useful steps have been taken to develop and extend the opportunities for civil society to make its contribution to collective Commonwealth endeavours.

The Commonwealth Secretariat and Foundation have instituted a series of bi-annual consultation meetings for an exchange with civil-society bodies, mainly Commonwealth associations, and the education group within the wider constituency plays an active part.

The Commonwealth's education sector pioneered the opening up of Ministerial Conferences to dialogue and participation with civil society. Since the beginning Commonwealth associations could apply for Observer status at Education Ministers' Conferences and this has given them the right to observe proceedings, speak in committees (though not plenaries), receive papers, make written submissions, and attend social events. The Commonwealth Education Liaison Committee, a meeting of High Commission representatives in London, was the mechanism traditionally used to approve the grant of observer status.

From 13CCEM in Botswana the Conferences have been made much more accessible to civil society by adding a 'parallel symposium' (or in Cape Town 'stakeholder forum') alongside the Ministerial Conference and addressing the same issues. Joint sessions with Ministers

#### Consortium Members December 2006

Association of Commonwealth Examination and Accreditation Bodies (ACEAB)  
 Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS)  
 Association for Commonwealth Studies (ACS)  
 Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU)  
 British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (BECM)  
 Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM)  
 Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa (CAPA)  
 Commonwealth Association of Science Technology and Mathematics Educators (CASTME)  
 Commonwealth Business Council (CBC) (Associate)  
 Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM)  
 Commonwealth Countries' League (CCL)  
 Commonwealth Human Ecology Council (CHEC)  
 Commonwealth Institute (CI) (Associate Member)  
 Commonwealth Legal Education Association (CLEA)  
 Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU)  
 Commonwealth Relations Trust (CRT) (Associate)  
 Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council (CYEC) (Associate Member)  
 Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC)  
 English-Speaking Union of the Commonwealth (ESU)  
 Federation of Commonwealth Open and Distance Learning Associations (FOCODLA)  
 Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS)  
 League for Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT)  
 Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) (Associate Member)  
 Royal Over-Seas League (ROSL) (Associate Member)

have been held and the conclusions and recommendations of the Stakeholder Forum have been passed to Ministers for consideration when drafting their own communiqués. The exchange of ideas has been facilitated by holding of the two events in the same building and the many opportunities for social intermingling that this affords. At later Conferences a Youth Forum was added and in Cape Town for the first time there will be a Teachers' Forum as well. On several occasions there has been an exhibition where NGOs have been able to display the education projects they have developed with partners.

Through different institutional arrangements, made necessary by considerations of security, civil society can also engage with Heads of Governments at their biennial meetings (CHOGMs). The Commonwealth Foundation convenes 'Commonwealth People's Forums to coincide with the CHOGMs and these make it possible to draw civil society concerns to the attention of Heads.

#### More information

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 Consortium website: [www.commonwealtheducation.org](http://www.commonwealtheducation.org),  
 CCEM website: [www.16CCEM.com](http://www.16CCEM.com), or Commonwealth  
 Foundation website: [www.commonwealthfoundation.com](http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com)

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