

**Address by Mrs Naledi Pandor, South African Minister of Education, at
the Conference on Commonwealth Educational Cooperation:**

**“Looking ahead at 50 entitled:
Achievements in Commonwealth educational cooperation:
Rising to 21st Century challenges”**

University of Oxford, 31 March 2009

Madame Chair

**Honourable Commonwealth Secretary-General,
Kamalesh Sharma,**

**Honourable Lord Patten of Barnes,
Chancellor of the University of Oxford,**

**Honourable John Hood,
Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford,**

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very happy to be here this afternoon, and feel particularly honoured to have been invited to address this first session of a remarkable event. Warm congratulations to the University of Oxford, our gracious and venerable host then and now, on the 50th anniversary of the first Commonwealth Education Conference.

Warm congratulations to all concerned on the 50th anniversary of the Commonwealth Scholarships, an enduring and inspiring example of intellectual exchange and talent promotion across the member nations of the commonwealth.

Warm congratulations to the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, who have done so much to make this Celebration happen, on their golden jubilee later in the year. It is astonishing that the council which relies so heavily on the voluntary efforts of committed citizens has endured for half a century. Our thanks to all concerned in this and previous generations for their tireless efforts in promoting Commonwealth dialogue on educational needs and access to quality education for the good of all.

It took generations of struggle against racism and colonialism to reveal the true value of the Commonwealth ideal in South Africa. Apartheid South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1961 reflected the transformation of the Commonwealth into the organisation we see today. The Commonwealth's long campaign against apartheid, in which practical assistance (notably including educational support) to the victims of oppression was combined with political mobilisation, represented an extraordinary defence of human liberty on behalf of the peoples of a country that was no longer a member. South Africa's return to membership in 1994 under President Mandela vindicated the Commonwealth's commitment and reflected my country's appreciation as well as its own adherence to Commonwealth values and principles.

By then there was no doubt where the Commonwealth stood, as the Singapore Declaration and Harare. Declarations had made clear:

- "We believe that international peace and order, global economic development and the rule of international law are essential to the security and prosperity of mankind;
- We believe in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief, and in the individual's inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which he or she lives;
- We recognise racial prejudice and intolerance as a dangerous sickness and a threat to healthy development, and racial discrimination as an unmitigated evil;
- We oppose all forms of racial oppression, and we are committed to the principles of human dignity and equality;
- We recognise the importance and urgency of economic and social development to satisfy the basic needs and aspirations of the vast majority of the peoples of the world, and seek the progressive removal of the wide disparities in living standards amongst our members."

In less than a month's time all the people of South Africa will participate as free and equal citizens in our fourth general election since democracy dawned. In so doing we will uphold our own democratic constitution and reinforce the inspiring values and principles that bind the modern Commonwealth.

The last of the Commonwealth principles in the list I read a moment ago is particularly telling today, as the world's nations, rich and poor, work with unprecedented intensity to rescue the global economy and national economies from the most severe crisis in generations. As education professionals all of us need to give attention to the need to monitor the current crises on multilateral economic relations and on new challenges that may have to be addressed by international community, including the Commonwealth.

Last year's Commonwealth Heads of Government's Aso Rock Declaration on "Development and Democracy" addressed the integral connection between poverty and good governance. It is above all else "the wide disparities of living standards" that disfigure my country's new and hopeful democracy and at times threaten to undo some of the advances we have made in establishing civil peace and creating a better quality of life for all. Incidentally, there is evidence from my own country and other developing countries where the coefficient of social and economic inequality is particularly large that inequality, not just poverty, is itself a factor in learners' educational performance. It seems possible that the mere knowledge that others have better access to life's chances may have a depressing effect on many learners' motivation. If this is so it adds yet another reason for us to redouble our efforts to reduce if not erase the immense differences in meaningful access to education that too many of our countries exhibit, as well as the equally vast differences across nations with which the Aso Rock Declaration was particularly concerned.

In a recent critical historical review of "Educational Multilateralism and World (Dis)Order" Karen Mundy observes that most educators today operate with a considerable awareness of the global forces which affect their work - be this in terms of the rising emphasis on technology and information in the classroom, the discourse of preparing children and nations for a competitive international information economy, or in other instances, the issues raised by an increasingly diverse, border-crossing population of learners. She argues that the established multilateral players in education have all too easily succumbed to the prevailing economic orthodoxies of the rich world and tailored their educational programmes

accordingly. She looks to the vitality of social movements as a sign of hope of a better path for international education co-operation, and concludes:

"Building the social and political foundations—the societal compromise— of a more just world order in an era of globalization will surely involve the construction of more humane, democratic and effective mechanisms of global governance, particularly around issues like education which are tightly bound into international notions of equality, social security and opportunity." ⁵

The Commonwealth association surely represents a different model of multilateral co-operation, more equal, more respectful and in many respects more creative, than the prevailing orthodox models which are based essentially on power relations.

Mr KoIchiro Matsuura, the Director-General of UNESCO, has an apt grasp of the nature of the challenges that have lately afflicted the world. He emphasises that while the global financial crisis affects everyone, it is those who were least responsible for its creation - the poor who will bear the full brunt of its fury⁶. Most disturbingly he observes that the current meltdown risks undoing the hard- won gains of recent years with some developing countries less likely than ever to achieve international development goals including the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All.

The Director-General has also stated that, "Girls often bear the brunt of economic shocks. They are the first to be taken out of school and put to work."⁷ The question that must be answered, is: How well prepared is the Commonwealth to deal with this new potential crisis of poverty and inequality? How can the Commonwealth turn disaster to advantage?

We are fortunate in that our existing links form an organised forum for careful reflection on steps we should take to address emerging challenges. Our connections should allow us to proactively determine responses and programmes. The economic crisis has thus brought into sharp focus the interdependence of our systems. What happens in one part of the world can indeed affect us all. This is where the role of the Commonwealth is vital in providing a platform for countries to confer, on an equal basis, and find solutions to our common challenges.

At Aso Rock the CHOGM declared that education was foremost among the Commonwealth's priorities, and indeed the Commonwealth's infrastructure for cooperation is perhaps better developed in education than any other sector. Moreover, this sector can perhaps lay better claim to being more representative of society given the inclusion of strong civil-society professional and voluntary organizations, and the efficacy of its cooperative institutions and programmes, especially the Commonwealth of Learning and the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan⁹. It is in this sector that we must ensure that our responses are not only innovative but also effective and coherent. An excellent example of this innovativeness is manifested by the Commonwealth's response to the tertiary education needs of small states, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The university is now helping countries expand course offerings collaboratively, thereby sharing the costs of capacity-building and programme development and incidentally joining the vanguard in the...age of eLearning¹⁰.

The current crisis must not be used as a sovereign excuse for the rich countries of the world to further marginalize the poor by turning their backs on their commitments. Fresh impetus is needed to push donors to meet their aid commitments especially towards the Millennium Development Goals of achieving universal primary education as well as gender parity. The World Bank has proposed that 0.7 percent of developed countries' stimulus 'package be devoted to finance a vulnerability fund to support developing countries.

The Commonwealth must add its voice to these calls because spending on education represents a smart investment that drives a country's economic competitiveness. Research shows that each extra year of schooling boosts the Gross National Product per capita by 4 to 6 percent. So, we need to ensure that the limited resources that are available to us within the Commonwealth are targeted at those most at risk.

The Commonwealth is a credible voice in world affairs. It is vital for our education voice to be heard. A proud record of education achievement adds to our credibility. First, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan. The Plan, apart from providing a practical manifestation of collaboration, has also proved to be one of the most enduring and successful forms of Commonwealth partnerships. A need exists to accelerate the collaboration over alumni activity between national agencies and bodies such as the Commonwealth.

More than 25 000 individuals have benefited from awards³. It does seem that if we are to increase the number of awards-holders to 2000 by the end of this year, then the 17th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers should give serious attention to the suggestion that member governments be formally solicited to contribute towards this venture. The possible creation of a permanent central fund to support Commonwealth Scholarships in developing countries on a shared-cost basis should also be seriously considered. These proposals have been advanced earlier in a slightly different format, they represent an ambitious agenda, but their fulfilment would require commitment and support from individual member-states.

Prominent among the achievements is the increasing number of African countries where CSFP awards are held. New destinations include countries which have not previously hosted awards, or have not done so for several years, such as Botswana, Ghana and Mauritius. Another trend that is emerging shows that the proportion of awards going to Africa has increased significantly. It is also gratifying to note that this increase does not appear to be at the expense of South Asia, whose proportion of awards has remained stable.

Secondly, the Commonwealth of Learning has implemented innovative technologies and programmes that have led to noticeable betterment of people's lives in the region. COL has taken up the task to expand education by overcoming barriers of distance and remoteness and despite tremendous financial constraints remain well-positioned to deliver on their long-term aim of ensuring that any learner, anywhere in the Commonwealth can study any distance-teaching programme available from any genuine college or university in the Commonwealth. The region has applauded COL's focus on higher education, teacher development, open schooling, eLearning and open educational resources. COL is expected to continue to develop learning and training materials, which are highly regarded, and give greater support to research, capacity-building and closer south-south linkages¹².

Thirdly, there is heartening progress towards the achievement of universal primary education in many Commonwealth countries. The rise in average net enrolment rate from 54% to 70% between 1999 and 2006 in sub-Saharan Africa and from 75% to 86% in South and West Asia is tacit evidence of the efficacy of the Education for All campaign and the sustained support accorded it through Commonwealth educational cooperation.

It is however also a sobering reality that with estimates of about twenty-seven million primary age school children still being out of school in Commonwealth countries, it seems likely that some Commonwealth countries will fail to achieve the Millennium Development Goals targets for 2015. Clearly that these countries had already missed the target for gender parity in primary and secondary schooling by 2005 is a matter of grave concern warranting serious attention. Obviously there are reasons that account for the failures, ranging from conflicts that

have severely limited mobility and thus resulted in a lack of access to education to the devastating effect that the scourge of HIV/AIDS has on pupils, their families, teachers and schools. Renewed commitment to attainment of the Millennium Development Goals targets, and to sustaining that achievement thereafter, is required, with more developed Commonwealth countries helping those furthest from the targets to achieve them.

Fourthly, the adoption and enforcement of the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol must rank as one of the most innovative interventions ever undertaken by the Commonwealth in an effort to stem the teacher brain-drain threatened many developing countries especially small states. Up to now, it seems that the protocol has largely balanced the rights of teachers to migrate internationally against the need to protect national education systems as well as preventing the exploitation of scarce human resources of poor countries.

Despite these successes, Madame Chair, there are areas in which we have to encourage urgent action if we are to make accelerated progress. Foremost in this regard is the transformation of education that will enhance progress in the Commonwealth countries actively, intentionally and proactively to addressing gender equity. In most contexts this has to be a call for special support for education for women and girls. Gender discrimination is often deeply embedded in social and cultural attitudes and practices that are slow to change; but, there is ample international good practice of successful interventions that the Commonwealth could consider and draw on. The commitment to address gender discrimination must likely be escalated in prominence and must be encapsulated into dedicated programmes that Commonwealth Ministers of Education should review at their triennial meetings.

Fifth, there is a need for a paradigm shift through adopting a more accommodating and inclusive approach to Education for All. Education must not be compartmentalized into discrete entities. There is thus a need to recognize the interdependence of the primary, secondary and tertiary cycles of education. In broadening the definition of the concept we would then embrace lifelong learning for all age groups, as well as the access to all levels by all learners. At the moment inclusive education remains a subject that is not at the centre Commonwealth discussions. If we are to expand education for all, giving greater attention to the education of learners with disabilities must receive urgent priority.

I would like to conclude by suggesting two key issues that we should factor into our discussions at this conference:

One : According to Sir John Daniel, the success of the campaign for universal primary education has in some countries created a surge of children towards secondary schooling, although with low survival rates, and there is nowhere for most of them to go. Given the vagaries of the campaign for UPE, not to mention the global economic downturn, it is extremely unlikely that the international development and donor community would sign up to organize and fund a campaign for universal secondary education. In expanding secondary education countries are likely to be largely left to their own devices. Many will find the task impossible unless the cost of quality secondary education can be drastically reduced by using alternative methods.¹³ The conference could consider alternative methods for providing universal secondary education as well as alternative funding models.

Two: Successfully universalizing secondary education within the Commonwealth could be accomplished within the context of COL helping to promote and expand the practice of open schooling in developing countries. There is therefore an urgent need to consider expanding open schooling to three of the Commonwealth's four regions. In addition, consideration could also be given to using the open-distance learning model to deal with the persistent challenge

that is so significant in some countries in the region, of unqualified and under-qualified teachers.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, today I have sought to reflect on Commonwealth educational multilateralism and cooperation. The past fifty years have witnessed several hallmarks of the successes in education. With the current economic crisis in full swing, we would be best served if we could strengthen and intensify cooperation, speaking with one voice in other influential multilateral fora on issues pertinent to our partnership. Challenges thus remain, but a frank admission of our weaknesses and the courage to remedy them would ensure that the Commonwealth remains as relevant and its interventions ever appropriate in the 21st Century.

I thank you.