

Challenges to education the Commonwealth in the next decade or two

Steve Packer

Steve Packer started life as a teacher in newly independent Uganda in the 1960s and has worked on issues of education and development for most of the last 40 years. Nearly 20 of these were spent in Commonwealth institutions including the Commonwealth Secretariat where he was both an education adviser, the coordinator of the Secretariat's multi-functional Human Resource Development Group and, briefly, Assistant Director in the Secretariat's overall Planning Unit. He initiated a stream of work on education in small states and is the joint author (with Mark Bray), of *Education in Small States: Concepts, Challenges and Strategies*. Other areas of interest sector policy development, education system management and administration, professional development strategies and teaching and learning about the Commonwealth.

As DFID's regional education adviser in Central Africa (1993-1998), Steve helped to develop national community schools and primary teacher development programmes in Malawi and school-based teacher development and primary reading programmes in Zambia. He worked on sector policy and sector wide programming in both countries and in Mozambique. From 1998-2002 he led DFID's education sector policy work flowing particularly from DFID's White Papers on poverty. He was heavily engaged in the planning, the process and the product of the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000. In 2002 he moved to Paris to help develop the new Education for All Global Monitoring Report and was the Report Team's Deputy Director for its first four editions. He took a special interest in aid for education. He works now as a part time consultant.

NOTES FOR CEC MEETING

The task that has been set is a major challenge in itself: *Challenges to education in the Commonwealth in the next decade or two*

This is so on at least two counts

First – there is the question – at least for me - of what this conference means in its banner headline when it refers to *Serving Commonwealth Education Effectively*.

What is *Commonwealth Education*?

I think it can be construed in a number of different ways. Put in terms of questions:

- Is this just a general statement about education and its development across the very diverse set of over 50 countries that belong to the CW? In much the same way that you might analyse any group of countries.
- Or does it refer more specifically to some educational issues and challenges that are in some way distinctive to the Commonwealth or to a sizeable group of its

members. For example, the challenge of scale in small states or perhaps even in Federal States?

- Is it about broader global challenges that impinge particularly strongly on the development of education in many Commonwealth countries? HIV/AIDS; globalisation; emergency.
- Or is it to do with the educational challenges to which Commonwealth organisations and bodies are well placed to make a distinctive contribution? If the aid programmes of high income CW countries are excluded, this is likely to mean activities that rely primarily on political and professional engagement, advocacy and influence.
- And perhaps, of a rather different order, is it about educating about the Commonwealth? Can serving Commonwealth education more effectively be meaningful without a broad shared understanding of the values and the potential of the CW?

It seems to me that some clarity on these questions and their answers may be necessary if the CEC is looking to be more effective in its work.

Or you may take the view that these are conceptual niceties and that it is just better and more practical to understand the major educational challenges that exist across the world and see in a fairly pragmatic way what various CW bodies can do to add value to their solution.

Either way, I suggest that some confirmation is needed about whether we are discussing CW education or educational issues that impact on CW countries as they do on others.

The second challenge for me, today, is to offer a set of significant challenges.

One look at this recent publication – *Commonwealth Education Partnerships* - shows how long a list this could be. Issues of access, quality, inclusion and resources are many and complex at all levels of education, in every educational institution in every country.

But my list is short and inevitably highly selective. And it is set at a macro level.

If challenged I am sure that your lists would be different to mine.

I have eight challenges – the first four are all about basic education.

Challenge 1

It is surely unacceptable in the 21st century that at least 77 million children of primary school age should be denied the opportunity of attending and completing a full cycle of primary education.

27 million of these children live in CW countries. Nearly 16.5 million of them are girls. It is true that some of these children will attend school at some point in their lives but their chances of completing a full cycle of education are slim. [CREATE]

85% of the CW total are children who live in six Commonwealth countries (using 2004 data); Ghana, India, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria and Pakistan (although in India and Kenya there have been significant improvements since the last set of internationally quality assured figures were issued).

The numbers of out of school children are falling – progress is being made but too slowly.

So this is a very basic challenge - how to ensure that these “missing” children receive the benefits of a basic education. As Deon Filmer puts it a little crudely in a paper for CW Education Partnerships, meeting this challenge will *depend on countries effectiveness at drawing the poor into the education system and keeping them there.*

Challenge 2

It is unacceptable too that gender should continue to be a bar to enrolment, retention and completion in primary and secondary schooling.

The global Millennium Development goal to achieve parity in primary and secondary school enrolment in 2005 was missed. It was a milestone – the first MDG target. But it passed without much international noise (except from UNICEF and GCE). The noise level should be raised again.

How do member countries of the CW fare on this measure? Again data are a problem but for 40 CW countries (2004) 19 countries had achieved parity in primary and secondary education (measured by GER in 2004) or were moving towards one or both parity targets (parity lying between 0.97 and 1.03).

27 countries had achieved parity at the primary level and 12 at the secondary level. And in some instances it is boys who are at a disadvantage.

This is a difficult target to measure as countries “drift” in out of parity – for example, the high income countries that experience difficulty in retaining boys at the upper end of the secondary system.

But much is now known about demand and supply side measures that help to enable girls to enrol in school and perform well there. It is not a lack of technical know how - rather

it is boldness on the part of governments to institute reforms that work. Abolition of fees, scholarships and bursaries, gendered budgets, school feeding etc.

Challenge 3

Too many schools fail too many children, especially children from poor households.

The real measure of UPE is whether all children complete a full cycle of schooling and attain the skills and the knowledge that is expected of them. As one study recently puts it there should really be a Millennium Learning Goal to monitor the outcomes of learning achievements. And this would not just apply to the poorest countries.

As yet this data is hard to come by although the number of comparative international learning assessments is growing.

An unsatisfactory proxy for primary school completion is often used (children who enter the last year of primary school).

Of a recent sample of 30 CW countries, 13 had fewer than 80% of students surviving to Grade 5 (not even the end of primary schooling).

Put a little more graphically, if 100 primary age children enrol in Standard 1 in Malawi, 34% survive to Standard 5 (of an eight year cycle) and 7% (of the original cohort) achieve minimum mastery in reading and numeracy. This is an extreme example but it is not unique.

The challenge to improve the quality of schooling is universal but raising the quality bar in low income countries is an absolutely critical issue if broader poverty reduction and economic growth challenges are to be met.

Challenge 4

The challenge of adult literacy: the forgotten people.

One legacy of low enrolment, gendered disadvantage and poor quality schooling (as well as the lack of a literate environment in which to practice literacy) is that in the order of 450 million people over the age of 15 lack basic literacy skills across the CW (out of a conservative global total of 780 million).

85% of this total figure lives in three countries in Asia: India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. But literacy rates dip below 70% in seven SSA CW countries and in PNG.

And lest this be thought to be a problem of poor countries alone – it is estimated that 5 million adults in the UK cannot read adequately and 15 million are insufficiently numerate for life in 21st century Britain.

Few deny the developmental costs of illiteracy. But despite UN decades and major reports it is still an issue that fails to attract the attention of national governments or of aid. There is an implicit (or even explicit) assumption that this is a problem that will go away with universal schooling.

This is an assumption that needs to be challenged and the EFA goal on literacy given much more weight. In this regard I commend two pieces of work, by Action Aid (and David Archer is here) and by the 2006 GMR.

An interim comment. The first four challenges all relate to basic education. They are all components of the MDG and EFA agenda. And the list could be extended. But I think it is right to place these challenges first.

Virtually all CW countries signed up to the Millennium Declaration in 2000 including its education related goals and targets. Subsequently many CW forums have given their strong backing to meeting all of the MDGs.

And over 40 full member countries of the CW formally supported the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000 and gave political commitment to the six EFA goals.

The challenge to attain these fundamental goals – whether they are defined in terms of human rights, essential freedoms, human capabilities or social and economic development - must be sustained including through CW channels.

Challenge 5

It is nevertheless the case that the MDG and EFA goals for education are starting points and not finishing lines.

Indeed in some quarters – including CW countries that achieved UPE and gender parity in a numerical sense many years ago – too much emphasis has been placed on the basic education agenda.

Increasingly the needs of expanding public services (1.6 million new teachers needed in SSA to achieve UPE), the changing mix of skills needed to pull out of poverty, adjust to the new global dynamics of economic growth and change and make on-going learning and re-training throughout life part of national education strategies, requires a much more comprehensive and sector balanced view of education than has hitherto been the case in many countries – rich and poor alike.

It requires too in many countries a rethink about the role of governments and other actors in the provision of post-primary education especially where resources are scarce.

One manifestation of these challenges is the emergence - or more correctly re-emergence - of long term education sector plans – given recent impetus in Africa at the African Finance Ministers meeting in Abuja last June. But found many more CW countries.

In part this reflects pressures exerted by the international aid community (PRSPs, EFA Plans, FTI plans etc) but it also represents national recognition of educational needs at all levels of the system; to make clear that each sub-sector impacts on the another (primary on secondary; tertiary on primary) in quite fundamental ways and that education systems grow and continue to change.

At best this trend responds too to too many short term initiatives and projects rather than sustained long term investments. This is a problem known to all countries whose education systems get forced into short term political cycles.

Challenge 6

At the severe risk of trivialising major and complex global issues I believe it correct to argue that education has to play a much more central role than hitherto in recognising and acting on some of the world's most intransigent problems.

I am thinking here of conflict and so-called "fragile" states: of climate change; and of HIV/AIDS, But the list could clearly be longer; for example, the impact of international mobility and migration.

There is an understandable tendency to think in traditional and normative terms about educational development – when the reality is that circumstances may be skewed significantly away from the desirable logic of balanced education sector development.

A Conflict

- Tragically, education may, in certain circumstances exacerbate conflict if it is inequitable in access or prejudicial in content but at best it has enormous potential for lessening the likelihood of conflict as well as helping communities to come out of conflict.
- This is a significant challenge. Although the numbers of armed conflicts has fallen in recent years, war and violence continue to take their terrible toll.
- In 2003, 18 countries had some level of armed conflict within their borders (five in the Commonwealth). 19 million people are refugees worldwide; 24 million people are displaced in their own countries – countries in most instances where more than one third of the population is below the age of 15.
- This means, as for example, in Sierra Leone, enabling 7,000 child soldiers who witnessed and often participated in civil war the chance – through education – to contribute to peace and national reconciliation.

B Fragile States

- In international jargon many countries are being classified as "fragile states."

- Definitions vary as do the countries which are or are not included.
- One, perhaps rather narrow OECD definition, suggests that fragile states are those where there is an inability or unwillingness to deliver services to people, or to ensure their delivery.
- However defined, there is growing attention (including as I speak by the Fast Track Initiative) to looking at ways of improving service delivery to help reduce fragility and thereby generate significant improvements in governance.
- At best equitable education services can provide an important normative base in fragile contexts encouraging some measure of social stability in very difficult situations.
- Perhaps upwards of 25 million children live in such situations now. Save the Children puts the figure at over 40 million.

C Climate Change

- In recent months the Stern Report on the Economics of Climate Change and the scientific Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have been published.
- Neither have anything much to say on education. That was not in their brief.
- But the implications for education of climate change and its impact are substantial.
- Understanding climate change, encouraging changes in personal behaviour and campaigning for government action are all important functions of education. But in some CW countries where sea level rise is already apparent, where increased levels of drought and flooding may result in the significant displacement of populations and where the risks of disaster have been heightened, education in its broadest sense has a vital role to play.
- In the CW this is particularly pertinent for small states and the CW has a strong record in addressing environmental and economic vulnerability of small states over many years.
- But perhaps there is also a challenge here for looking at the educational implications of climate change in the small states of the CW and in the drought prone regions of Southern Africa.

D HIV/AIDS and Education

- It is estimated that 60% of those who suffer from HIV live in CW countries.

- World wide there are in the order of 15 million AIDS orphans under the age of 17. In SSA this represents just under 10% of all children. And an orphan is 13% less likely to attend school than a non orphan.
- This pandemic represents an enormous challenge to education – which has been described as the “social vaccine” to prevent the spread of the disease and mitigate its impact.
- Increasingly countries have education strategies within their national AIDS strategies and AIDS strategies within their education sector plans. But not uniformly so and not necessarily in a fully comprehensive way – addressing the needs of orphans, teachers, the curriculum, sexual harassment and rape in schools and so on.
- The CW Sec has been doing good work in this area; but has the potential to do more in association with UN based initiatives working on this issue.

These bullet point assertions are inadequate in conveying the complexity of the educational challenges which they throw up. And alarmingly all four can occur in the same place; the mix of violence, weak governance, unstable and uncertain weather patterns and the prevalence of AIDS, can come together in a recipe for sustaining poverty and injustice.

Challenge 7

Against this backdrop there are may be more encouraging things to say about the place of development assistance in addressing these and other challenges.

As one recent study put the *aid industry* is undergoing significant change.

Commitments to double ODA, increase levels of debt relief, support an ever growing number of multilateral funds and improve aid effectiveness through the vehicle of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness together have the potential to result in significant shifts in aid architecture.

CW finance ministers meeting in Colombo last year underlined this fact and asked the CW Secretariat to look at how the CW can influence the international debate

What does all this mean for education?

In this country - potentially – it means quite a lot.

The Chancellor and DFID have made commitments to double expenditure on education by 2010 and to spend a total of £8.5 billion on the sector in the 10 years to 2015.

This represents a step change in British support for education in developing countries.

The challenge now is to translate pledges into practical strategy.

Canada too increased its percentage of ODA for education by 3.4 points in the first few years of this decade although in Australia and NZ the proportion has fallen. But together the four main CW donors accounted for approximately 23% of total DAC aid to basic education.

And India is emerging as a donor too.

Does all this mean that aid that will really make the difference in enabling poor countries to implement credible education sector plans and programmes?

Or is William Easterly right – in his book *The White Man's Burden* – to argue that there is little likelihood of these big new aid plans making a difference, at least based on past experience?

One difficulty in answering the question – certainly in the education sector – is the paucity of evidence of the impact of aid on education although the W Bank has sought to remedy this for its own programmes.

Given that financial and technical aid is rightly or wrongly a part of the fabric of education and educational relationships in a majority of CW countries – as donor or as recipient or as both – it is probably deserving of greater scrutiny than hitherto. The overall fabric of aid to education and its impact in CW countries needs attention – as distinct from particular programmes or schemes.

Challenge 8

So how can the CW (not just CEC) be more effective in playing a part in meeting these challenges and other challenges? And here I am probably straying from my brief – and may be anticipating later debate.

I would suggest in three main ways:

- 1 Through strengthening its political engagement and campaigning for education.

Its major institutions and organisations have little or no financial clout even if some its members do. However, many of the challenges that have been described are less to do with a lack of technical know how and much more to do with political commitment and will. It is not, for example, that there is a lack of knowledge about how to provide a reasonable level of primary education for all children. It is the will to make it happen; to give sustained political commitment, to allocate the necessary resources (including aid in

some instances); and to be accountable for the quality of service delivery and levels of educational attainment. This is the political economy of education.

Recent history (and probably before) suggests that significant education changes in many CW countries have come about as a result of high level political determination to bring about change – for example in post apartheid S Africa, or through the recent determination of the Indian government to meet its long standing constitutional pledge to enable all children to go to school and so on around the world.

We have also seen the rise of global campaigning – GCE and the Global March on Child Labour. These efforts have had political impact – not least with the Chancellor in this country. And some unlikely bodies like the World Economic Forum taking a political and private sector interest in basic education.

Can the CW in its various forms take a more aggressive campaigning stance on education?

2 Building on the strengths of long standing professional constituencies.

I was struck at the 16CCEM in Cape Town in December at the ability of academics, civil servants, education practitioners and students to talk with and learn from one another with apparent ease. The English language and some shared heritage clearly oil the wheels.

I was surprised too to see a list of 41 bodies working for education in the CW. Some of course represent very long standing programmes such as the Association of CW Universities and the Commonwealth of Learning.

Can these bodies find ways of not only doing their specialist technical work well but collectively having a more prominent, even campaigning voice on education?

3 Do *niche activities* really well.

That may sound a bit patronising which is not my intention.

I recall endless debates in the CW Secretariat which I guess continue regarding where does the CW have comparative advantage in education. I think the answer has to be partly a) in the way it promotes dialogue and b) in the quality of the delivery of very specific activities.

Conclusion

One thing that has heartened me in this country in recent years has been the number of occasions on which education and development has been debated in both chambers of parliament and in specialist committees.

And I am sure that CEC has played a part in promoting this attention.

Believing as I do that political commitment lies at the heart of making education for all a reality, I look forward now to debating how CEC can be even more influential and proactive in ensuring that education figures in all of the major global debates of the next decade and more. For a Commonwealth voice need not be parochial – but have messages for the world at large. And there are few more important messages than making good education for all a reality.