



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

**H. E. HON. UHURU KENYATTA CGH, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF KENYA AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE
KENYA DEFENSE FORCES**

DURING

**THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 21ST CONFERENCE OF
COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS (21CCEM)**

NAIROBI

27TH APRIL 2022

*(Delivered by Cabinet Secretary Fred Matiang'i Cabinet Secretary Ministry of
Interior and Coordination of National Government)*

- **The Secretary General, Commonwealth Secretariat, Rt. Hon Patricia Scotland, QC,**
- **Chairperson 20CCEM and Fiji Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, Hon. Premila Kumar,**
- **Incoming Chair 21CCEM, Kenya Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Education, Prof. George A.O. Magoha,**
- **Hon. Ministers of Education from Commonwealth Member States,**
- **Members of the Diplomatic Corps,**
- **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.**

1. On behalf my administration and the Kenyan people, **I warmly welcome you to Nairobi. *Karibuni!*** I send greetings to those ministers who could not participate in person and are joining us virtually.

2. After two years of Covid-related travel restrictions, it is good to meet in person once again. It is, therefore, **with great pleasure that I join you for the official opening of this 21st Conference of the Commonwealth Education**

Ministers. I thank Commonwealth member states for supporting and endorsing Kenya to host this important meeting.

3. This conference takes place as we progressively emerge from the devastating Covid-19 pandemic which has created **major social and economic disruptions and set back education progress.** At the peak of the pandemic, over 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries were impacted by the sudden closure of learning institutions. The closures on average lasted 38 weeks with some countries remaining closed for over 60 weeks. In the Commonwealth countries, an estimated 500 million learners were affected by school closures. This is the first time in history that all learning institutions have been closed across the world.
4. The extended worldwide closure of education institutions has led to learning losses for students, increased levels of school dropout and exacerbated existing educational inequalities. These losses will not be easily recovered even if schools quickly return to their pre-2020 performance levels. As a result, education gains most of the Commonwealth countries have made over the last 50 years are at serious risk of being

rolled back in the absence of major transformation of the education sector.

Ladies and Gentlemen

5. Against this backdrop the theme of this conference ***“Rethinking Education for Innovation, Work and Sustainability: Learning for Life.”*** is both appropriate and timely. We do indeed need to rethink education because we are at an inflexion point. We are at a moment in history when we have a unique opportunity to build better and more resilient education systems and to accelerate learning for all. It is a moment to make our education systems more responsive to the changing nature of work and to transform education into a more effective tool of socioeconomic change.
6. **This is a task that puts education ministers on the cusp of history. I challenge you to seize the moment and** emulate other sectors. Faced with a global pandemic that was spiraling out of control, the **health sector** produced vaccines in record time. Similarly, faced with movement restrictions, **businesses** went digital providing and purchasing more goods and services online, raising

e-commerce's share of global retail trade from 14% in 2019 to about 17% in 2020. **This is the step change we seek in the education sector.**

7. We are looking to you, our education ministers, to **lead the sector into a new post-covid re-imagined education frontier.** No doubt this will be the essence of your discussion during this conference, but allow me to propose a few ideas for your consideration:

8. **The first is that we must complete the unfinished agenda of access, quality, and equity.** To achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and create the means by which low-income countries can become high-income countries, requires a renewed effort to expand **quality education opportunities for all children.** The record of progress towards this goal in Commonwealth countries is currently quite mixed.

9. Before the pandemic, Kenya had achieved remarkable progress in improving access and equity in basic education. Kenya introduced Free Primary Education and Free Day Secondary Education policies in 2003 and 2008, respectively. As a result, the primary school Gross Enrollment Ratio increased from 56 percent in 2002 to 92 percent in 2018

while secondary school Gross Enrollment Ratio increased from 67 percent in 2016 to 71 percent in 2019.

10. **But these quantitative gains, Ladies and Gentlemen, mask challenges** of equity and quality which government was systematically addressing before the disruption from the pandemic. A comprehensive set of reforms to create a path of sustained quality improvements was underway which included:

- i. **Implementation of a Competence Based Curriculum** which *inter alia* celebrates the creative potential of **all our children** rather than leaving them with **labels of failure**; teaches our children the skills of **critical thinking** and **problem solving** and inculcates **critical social values**.
- ii. **Reforms in teacher management and development** to improve teacher quality and service delivery at the school level.
- iii. **Improved school inputs** including textbooks, to ensure each learner in grades one to twelve has access to essential learning materials.
- iv. Investments in **digital education** including the distribution of over one million tablets to schools and

the posting of over 4,900 interactive online lessons on the Kenya education cloud.

- v. **Inclusion policies** such as a bursary program for vulnerable children, policies to eliminate systemic constraints to schooling such as Female Genital Mutilation and the introduction of a re-entry policy to ensure teenage mothers are supported to return to school.

11. Several Commonwealth countries are implementing similar foundational reforms. We need to rebuild and maintain momentum on these efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

12. Second, we urgently need to recover learning losses. Simply getting students back to school is not enough. A variety of approaches will be needed to ameliorate and recover the losses. For example, we need to quantify the extent of learning losses in our countries. Towards this end, when Kenyan schools re-opened in January 2020, the government conducted school re-entry learning assessments for students in primary education to inform re-entry behavior and learning recovery strategies.

13. Countries also need to strengthen measures to increase retention and completion, particularly for girls and students from the poorest households and to also scale up innovations that emerged during the pandemic. This is, in some ways, new territory for the sector. The **sharing of experiences across the Commonwealth is essential** to achieve full education recovery.
14. **Third, countries need to leverage innovations, in particular technology,** to improve classroom instruction, and support teacher professional development. When schools closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, most countries used online platforms to deliver education. However, data from UNICEF and World Bank indicate that primarily because of a lack of connectivity at home, only a quarter of the school children worldwide were able to access meaningful online learning.
15. As education ministers, you have an opportunity to leverage the Commonwealth of Learning to promote innovative technology solutions and foster an enabling environment for digital transformation across the Commonwealth.

16. **The fourth** and final proposal, **Ladies and Gentlemen,** **is that countries need to strengthen the linkages between education and the workplace.** Today's generation of young people faces a rapidly changing world. Due to changes in the nature of work and changes in technology, demand for high-level skills will grow, and many low- and medium-skilled jobs will become obsolete or poorly paid. Estimates indicate that in the coming decades around **two billion jobs are at risk** of disappearing due to automation.
17. In part because education change is lagging these seismic shifts, **we face a paradoxical situation** where on the one hand some 40 percent of employers globally are finding it difficult to recruit people with the skills they need while on the other hand millions of educated youths remain unemployed.
18. While sustained basic education reforms in many of our countries are creating a solid foundation to strengthen the education-work linkage, **the higher education system is in crisis in this regard.** The key challenges are growing demand, limited resources, and a lack of relevance to national development needs.

19. Estimates indicate that Sub-Saharan Africa will see university enrolments grow from 7.4 million in 2015 to 21.7 million in 2040. A 2013 Taskforce Report in Kenya noted there was a “proliferation of public universities without corresponding growth in academic staff and other resources.” Further “there is no correlation between the programmes offered at the universities with the overall national development agenda.”
20. How then do universities establish sustainable funding models to meet this surge in numbers and ensure programs are relevant to the needs of the labor market?
21. **I urge you to urgently address the weak link between education and the workplace.** High levels of youth unemployment, especially among well- educated youth, poses social and political risks to countries. At the same time, more vibrant higher education systems will accelerate recovery and economic growth.

Ladies and Gentlemen

22. **As you reimagine education, you might want to look at high performing education systems,** such as

Finland and Singapore, for instructive lessons. Key among them is:

23. **Strong political support for education is essential.**

Leaders in high-performing education systems have convinced their citizens that it is worth investing in the future through education and that it is better to compete on the quality of labour rather than on the price of labour.

24. Education was embedded in the African freedom struggle whose drumbeat was to eliminate poverty, ignorance, and disease. Indeed, former President Nyerere of Tanzania is said to have defended high education spending with a statement **“if you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”**

25. It is now clear that our forefathers were insightful in making education central to their struggle, because indeed education is *a sine qua non* of socioeconomic development. I encourage you to reinvigorate this economic business case for education to **galvanize political and social support for education in the face of competing demands for resources.**

26. **Education must be adequately funded.** During the pandemic, funding for education was reduced in many

countries due to a combination of factors: a reduction in both national education budgets, as well as in international support, a decline in tax revenues because of economic contraction and a decline in household incomes.

27. But we know that to achieve all the objectives outlined above, countries need to allocate at least 20% of their national budgets to education. Equally important they need to utilize existing resources more effectively, cut waste, and ensure that every cent delivers real learning.

28. Towards this end, during the Global Education Summit held in London last July, Kenya rallied world leaders through the **Kenyatta Declaration** to commit to increased domestic education spending. Leaders recognized that domestic financing is and **will remain the most significant and sustainable form of funding for education** and heads of state pledged to maintain or increase education spending to at least **20% of total public expenditure.**

29. I am proud to confirm that Kenya has honoured this commitment and allocates about 25% of its budget to education.

30. High performing education systems recognize that **the quality of a school system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.** Top-performing school systems attract the strongest principals to the toughest schools and the most talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms. These systems also give national recognition to the critical role of teachers and reward strong performers.

Ladies and Gentlemen

31. I would like to challenge education **ministers to harness the Commonwealth more strategically to build capacity and broaden skills** through programs such as twinning arrangements, knowledge exchange programs as well exchange of lecturers and students. We have witnessed the value of such arrangements in Kenya. The research partnership program between the Kenya Medical Research Institute and the University of Oxford has been hugely successful producing world class scientific innovations, nurturing scientists and expanding research capacity.

32. We need many more such partnerships **to reduce the widening gap between rich and poor nations.** It does not augur well for shared global prosperity and stability

when the “Best Global Universities” as ranked in the US News database, are predominantly Western universities. Partnership arrangements such as Rwanda has with Carnegie Mellon University **provide a useful model for reducing the gap** between rich and poor countries.

33. In a similar vein, Commonwealth Ministers of Education should be alarmed to note that by 2050 Korea and Japan, will be enrolling 80 percent or more of their high school graduates to higher education while countries such as the Central African Republic, and Niger will, be struggling to reach 5 percent enrolment in higher education. These are critical issues that should be central to your deliberations this week.

34. **Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen,** I would like to posit that **the Commonwealth is a sleeping giant.** I invite you to seize this unprecedented moment in history and wake this giant up. You can do so by recognizing that your role as education ministers is no longer to simply keep the sector on track. You need to fundamentally reorganize the sector, re-engineer it and re-imagine it boldly and creatively. This will make education a catalyst for releasing the full potential of the 2.5 billion inhabitants of the

Commonwealth, which will in turn enable the organization to realise its promise of **shared goals of prosperity, democracy and peace and increase its global punch.**

35. I am confident that education ministers participating in this conference have the capacity and the political will and support to lead the broad-based education transformation we seek.

36. As I conclude my remarks, I wish to thank all of you once again for taking time to attend this important meeting. I wish you fruitful deliberations and safe travel back home after the conference. I also take this opportunity to invite you to visit and enjoy Kenya's rich tourist attractions.

37. It is now my pleasure and honour to declare this meeting officially opened!

I thank You.

2334 words, 23 minutes read