



Commonwealth Secretary-General

27 April 2022

**21st Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers
Opening Address by the Secretary-General,
The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC**

Your Excellency, Honourable Ministers, High Commissioners,
Distinguished delegates and officials, Commonwealth friends
and colleagues,

Welcome, and thank you for being with us.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the people of Kenya for the
warm welcome and hospitality extended to me, and to the
many representatives of our Commonwealth family.

I send my deep condolences to my dear brother, His
Excellency President Kenyatta, a great Commonwealth leader
and global champion for Education, who sadly cannot be with
us today.

Mr President, I express my heartfelt gratitude to you and your
Government for hosting this important ministerial meeting.



Commonwealth Secretary-General

I thank the Cabinet Secretary Dr Fred Matiangi for graciously agreeing to make remarks on behalf of His Excellency, the President.

It is my great privilege to be here in Kenya today, and participating with all of you - whether in person or virtually - in this Opening Ceremony for the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers.

I offer this thanks in particular at poignant time of national mourning for former President [Emilio Muaii] Kibaki, a giant of Kenya and the Commonwealth, described by President Kenyatta as “the gentleman of Kenyan politics”, who will be afforded the great and fitting honour of a state funeral on Friday.

President Kibaki made a dramatic difference to the lives of millions of children in Kenya by introducing free primary education and chartering public universities in the country on an unprecedented scale during his tenure. He did so, so as “to produce global citizens who would work in any part of the world.” I can attest to the quality of Kenya’s excellent



Commonwealth Secretary-General

education system whenever we interview candidates at the Commonwealth.

He was a great economist and was instrumental in introducing performance management into the public service, which garnered global recognition.

We salute him and honour his legacy.

God rest his soul.

It is not surprising therefore that many have travelled thousands of miles to be here, and many are joining virtually for this hybrid conference.

A warm welcome to you all.

The hybrid nature of this meeting is unique - as I said in my correspondence with Their Excellencies the Cabinet Secretaries for Foreign Affairs and Education about this Conference, a hybrid ministerial meeting organised at relative short notice is extraordinary.



Commonwealth Secretary-General

But we took the view that we continue to work in extraordinary circumstances, the issues at stake are extraordinarily important, and Kenya showed extraordinary vision, commitment and tenacity in offering to bring the Commonwealth education family together, that the Secretariat should do everything in our power to play our role as convenor.

But it is my sincere hope that the need for such hybridity will pass and this will be the first and only hybrid conference - and that all ministerial meetings from CHOGM onwards will be face to face once more.

We know that all of those joining us virtually would prefer to be with us physically here in beautiful Kenya, enjoying the friendship and warmth to which we've all become accustomed.

This is the first time the Commonwealth education family has come together in Nairobi since 1987.



Commonwealth Secretary-General

Then, it was for the 10th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers on the theme of ‘Vocational orientation of education’.

We gather here again, 35 years later, at a time of great change and challenge.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the global learning crisis, with many learners losing access to their classrooms. Recovery from the pandemic and transition back to regular schooling is slow, and there is a need to catch up.
- Despite some EdTech having been introduced as a mitigating measure, and despite some initial optimism, it is clear that especially the poorest children have missed significant learning

We gather with clear needs and priorities.

To focus on the fundamentals:

- Urgently reaching every child and enable them to attend school



Commonwealth Secretary-General

- Protecting their wellbeing and mental health, so that they are ready to learn;
- Ensuring schools are effective places for learning

And to drive progress:

- Transforming education systems into resilient and inclusive spaces - able to absorb shocks and crises and cater to the needs of everyone
- Defining new paths for learning;
- Realising the potential of the Commonwealth's abundant youth - the focus for sustainable development, and the future of our family of nations.
- And converting technological advancement into real-world opportunities for our children and youth.

And we gather at a time of great hope and opportunity:

- Hope in our natural advantage as a family of nations, as a community of common heritage, shared values, rich diversity and great inspiration.



Commonwealth Secretary-General

- And opportunity in the moments and milestones than lie ahead:

Starting today, with the Conference of Education Ministers, which has so often set the course for pioneering cooperation, innovation and implementation

Moving to The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kigali, now only two months away, where we will gather under the theme of ‘Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming’. CHOGM offers us a distinct opportunity to give special focus to carrying forward the priorities we agree here in Nairobi.

And looking ahead to the end of this decade, and the urgent, transformative promise at the heart of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals - to leave no-one behind.

To achieve our vital SDG goals, there are five priority areas - which are highlighted in our background paper - which I would like to commend to you for consideration



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Five areas of focus that could support accelerated actions towards the SDGs.

First, to target student learning by developing the basics: foundational literacy and numeracy. These are the gateway to the development of other skills, such as digital literacy.

‘Learning for all’ requires foundational learning for everyone

Second, ensuring the intervention is affordable. Available finance per student, not counting recurring costs, is less than \$10 per student per year in some Commonwealth countries. Therefore, interventions need to be of comparable cost - but also considered in relation to long-term gains from learning.

Third, to remind ourselves that interventions needs to be effective for the poorest. Technology enabled education to continue during COVID-19 lockdowns in many places - but not for everyone: globally, at least 30% went without learning continuity. Post-COVID, we must make sure that the poorest 30% are included in the group of primary beneficiaries.



Commonwealth Secretary-General

Fourth, committing to a clear timescale for impact. This is another reason why the SDGs are so helpful - because eight years is a credible timescale for transformative change, ensuring proven interventions can be delivered comprehensively and at scale.

And fifth, we need a big acceleration. For children that are only achieving one year of learning in six years of schooling, an acceleration of 10% – equivalent to 1.1 years of learning in six years of schooling – is not sufficient.

We need to look at interventions that can accelerate progress by ten-fold. By combining the right interventions, with the right partnership, we can do this. I fiercely believe it.

There are best practices related to these key themes from across the Commonwealth. I look forward to hearing about them in this meeting, and hearing the thoughts of all Honourable Ministers on recommendations.

As with all Commonwealth meetings, what we bring and what we take away are both of value and importance.



Commonwealth Secretary-General

Each has something to offer, all have something to gain.

But I can say this to you at the outset: the Secretariat under my leadership will continue to be totally committed to working with each and every one of you to drive your recommendations forward, with a clear focus on what we aspire to, and what we can achieve.

I am often asked what motivates me as Secretary-General, what sustains me.

It is this.

It is our special ability as a family of nations to come together, across regions, nations and sectors to work together for the benefit of 2.5 billion people.

Too often our world is defined by the lowest common denominator; but we seek the highest possible multiplier effect for the results we can achieve together

I am passionately committed to maintaining our A+ as a high-performing Secretariat, with education mainstreamed through



Commonwealth Secretary-General

our policy teams, seamlessly serving the whole Commonwealth as a convenor, a collaborator, and a catalyst.

This is the reality and truth of the Commonwealth in which I believe so profoundly.

It is, in essence, the same truth taught to us in that great African principle, Ubuntu:

“I am because we are - and since we are, therefore, I am”.

Caring, sharing, respect and compassion

Where we all belong as people, and partners, where we all participate, and we all succeed together - not incrementally, but exponentially

That’s what motivates me, that’s what keeps me going.

I hope it strikes a chord with all of you.



Commonwealth Secretary-General

So, let us seize the moment - and bring together a deliverable plan to leave no-one behind, and harnesses the power of education to change lives, and change the world.