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# Introduction

The origins of this book lie in work commissioned for the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2009. A discussion paper prepared for ministers and senior officials attending the conference stimulated debate and attracted positive feedback (Crossley *et al.*, 2009). In the light of this presentation, additional research and analysis was conducted to produce the present publication. Given that 28 Commonwealth countries have populations below two million (and 22 below one million), the focus on small states is relevant to the majority of Commonwealth members.<sup>2</sup>

This book is designed as a stimulus for policymakers and other analysts concerned with or engaged in the shaping of educational priorities and strategies for small states. It recognises encouraging developments, for example, in the domain of ICT, while also noting the challenges of changing economic and environmental circumstances. The book builds on the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat in this area,<sup>3</sup> and in some respects it is an update of the review prepared by Crossley and Holmes in 1999.<sup>4</sup> It is hoped this may help to support the Secretariat and other Commonwealth organisations as they continue to work with small states worldwide.

The study draws on original research, international databases, related literature and consultations with policymakers, planners and practitioners in both small and larger states. Feedback from ministers and their senior officials at the 17th CCEM provides a core foundation for the analysis. This is combined with insights gained from discussions with personnel from international agencies, including the Commonwealth and UNESCO, and from field visits by the lead authors to Papua New Guinea, Turks and Caicos Islands, Fiji Islands, Solomon Islands and Suriname. Formal written input was contributed by educational planners, practitioners and researchers in small states, including Anguilla, Belize, Botswana, Jamaica, Mauritius, Montserrat, St Lucia and Solomon Islands, and by academic specialists in the field of comparative and inter-

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national education. The research draws upon the resources and networks of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning and the University of Bristol's specialist Education in Small States Research Group ([www.small-states.net](http://www.small-states.net)). Original field research carried out by doctoral researchers working at the University of Bristol helped to ground the study in the views of practitioners and in recent empirical evidence of educational policy in practice in small states worldwide, as did material provided by participants in the UNESCO/IIEP Advanced Training Programme. During July 2009, members of the research team participated in the IIEP policy forum on 'Tertiary Education in Small States: Planning in the Context of Globalisation', and this generated further high-level input, many helpful contacts and much valuable information. A mixture of research methodologies characterises the overall study, and the book benefits greatly from up-to-date statistical data compiled for and from UNESCO *EFA Global Monitoring Reports* and from involvement in a parallel study of the performance of Commonwealth countries in achieving global goals and targets in basic education (Packer and Aggio, 2010).

The study draws upon socio-cultural perspectives in the field of comparative and international education that are sensitive to cultural and contextual differences, and to the nature and influence of global policy trends and trajectories. The book therefore aims to bridge the world of research and scholarship, and that of educational policy and practice in ways that can inform ongoing planning within small states and contribute to future regional and pan-Commonwealth consultations on small states' educational policies and priorities.

When the organisers of the 17th CCEM set the theme for the conference as 'Towards and Beyond Global Goals and Targets', they particularly had in mind the EFA goals and objectives and the MDGs related to education. The EFA objectives were set at a conference held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990) and were given greater specificity in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 (UNESCO, 2000). Six EFA goals were set in Dakar:

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;

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4. Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
  5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in good quality basic education.
  6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence for all, so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The MDGs, set by the UN in 2000, dovetail with these EFA objectives. Among the eight MDGs, two (goals 2 and 3) are particularly concerned with education, namely:

- Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling;
- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education no later than 2015.

Many small states are well advanced in realising the EFA objectives and the MDGs, but others still have some distance to go. In line with the spirit and core values of the Commonwealth, this book highlights the ongoing potential of co-operation among small states. It also provides lessons that extend beyond the Commonwealth; UNESCO, which has 193 member states, including all the Commonwealth states, provides a forum for such wider consideration of lessons and strategies. The following chapters consider ways in which ongoing partnerships and collaboration at local, national, regional and international levels can help to advance the potential identified here.