

## Chapter 7: Young People and Education

### Young people and the respect and understanding agenda

179 More than 60 per cent of the Commonwealth's population are aged under 30 years; the proportion is closer to three-quarters in some member countries. Young people are the inheritors of a changing world – its economic distributions, social positions, cultural identities and historical narratives. They need not be passive recipients of these things; with appropriate support and political will young people can be an active, positive force for development, locally, nationally and internationally.

180 But for this to happen, they need to be seen and treated as potential assets and engaged in processes of dialogue and decision-making. They need to be included in forums where it is possible to listen and participate, but also to put forward their own point of view and have their own narratives heard, discussed and debated. There also needs to be a deeper understanding of the inter-generational transmission of narratives.

181 In this regard, we have to recognise the critical importance of school principals and administrators – and eventually teachers – as leaders who can potentially change social reality by the way in which they manage their schools. Schools, after all, often have diverse workforces themselves (that is, teachers) and the principal can set the tone for the entire school and thereby influence the way in which the children grow up thinking about issues such as community, religion and violence.

182 Most young people enter workforces that have either a limited demand for their skills or where there are very few opportunities for decent work at all. Between 2000 and 2015 an estimated 1 billion young men and women will enter the labour market and try to find work – but there will not be 1 billion jobs waiting for them. In terms of both the uncertainty of employment and the fact that as young people they are simply not accorded respect in many societies, they are in some senses a marginalised group. But they are also unlikely to self-identify *as* a group, still less to organise as a social force.

183 The Commission notes that it is essential to think about respect and understanding in an inter-generational context, and to be acutely aware of the impact of societal norms, particularly patriarchy and deference, on the self-confidence and development of young people. In many situations, authority structures need to be reconstructed so they do not silence young people, and particularly young women and other groups whose voice is normally stilled through a reference to 'tradition' or 'custom'.

184 When young people are disenfranchised or humiliated or made to feel that they have little say and no future, they may become drawn into movements or ideologies that appear to guarantee them a place in the world and give them a solid identity. In some instances, inspiring or forceful leaders may draw them into conflicts as combatants,

literally as foot soldiers. World-wide an estimated 300,000 people under the age of 18 are now, or have recently been, involved in armed conflict, and another 500,000 have been recruited into military or paramilitary forces.

185 But young people need not be only the victims or perpetrators of violence; they also have an important role as peace-makers. They are not so much the problem as at the heart of the solution.

186 Some of the most innovative programmes for involving young people in post-conflict reconstruction are provided by Commonwealth programmes themselves – an example is the project that explicitly seems to build respect and understanding among and between former child soldiers, young people and adults in the former conflict zone of Northern Uganda.

187 More generally, Commonwealth programmes provide examples of how young people's presence and skills can be valued, appreciated and used in activities normally undertaken only by adults. The Commonwealth Youth Programme engages young people in its own governance structures whilst youth representatives are included as members of election observation missions.

188 Other programmes focus on working alongside stigmatised groups. Groups in society with illnesses or diseases that are seen as a social taboo are often at the harsh end of casual, and sometimes even official, vilification and hatred. Their treatment amounts to an especially offensive form of disrespect, particularly if their original ailment or suffering is the product of poverty, hardship and ignorance.

### **Youth Ambassadors for Positive Living**

189 Respect and understanding for people living with AIDS is promoted through a 'Youth Ambassadors for Positive Living' programme, operating in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. The Youth Ambassadors are usually HIV-positive volunteers who engage in peer education and campaign for appropriate policy responses among government and civil society. Their message is one of de-stigmatisation.

190 One of the future activities planned is to develop learning materials for political literacy. The aim would be to enhance the capacity of organised youth groups and others to become effective advocates for democracy and good governance through their participation in observer missions, peace-building initiatives and other governance processes. This is very much in the mould of building resilience to extremism.

191 These are just a few of many examples. The challenge is to broaden and extend the effective participation of young women and men in the development process in their own countries and regions.

## Empowerment can be created through youth parliaments

192 In the Pan-Commonwealth Youth Caucus, as well as in the overall youth sector in the Pacific Islands region, there is much discussion surrounding the need for countries to host annual or bi-annual Youth Parliaments to promote good governance through positive practice. Youth Parliaments, of which there are several models throughout the world, are exercises in which young people elect their own leaders and participate in a two-week parliamentary debate on issues of their choosing. The resolutions are then passed on to relevant government departments, the national legislative assembly and donors for consideration and further action.

193 The Tonga Youth Parliament is aiming to promote good governance through a different method in the near future. Rather than only electing young leaders, the Tonga National Youth Congress, with assistance from the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), will train these leaders to behave with a level of respect appropriate to members of a national legislative assembly. When the young people act in a more respectful way, the expectation is that they will influence not only other young leaders but the national legislative assembly as well. The entire Youth Parliament is televised live and is also aired on the radio throughout all of the islands.

## Sport can also promote empowerment and mutual understanding

194 The Commonwealth Games, perhaps one of the most visible and well-known aspects of the Commonwealth, are another good example of how the Commonwealth already promotes respect and understanding. Also known as the 'friendly games', the Games promote the pursuit of health and provide an opportunity for young people to strive for excellence, more so since the inauguration of the four-yearly Commonwealth Youth Games in 2000.

195 Sport is a vocation open to all people, irrespective of disability, ethnicity or economic position. Rigorous training and a commitment to winning medals for one's nation can help to overcome any perceived divides within that nation. The impact of the Games goes beyond the quadrennial event. In its commitment to the three core values of humanity, equality and destiny, the Commonwealth Games Federation also seeks to improve the lives and societies of Commonwealth people by assisting education through sport development and physical recreation.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## Education is inevitably central to the cause of respect and understanding

- 196 In the longer run, the biggest gains in shaping shared narratives across potential divides will most likely come from investment in, and rethinking of, education. This was one of the most frequently mentioned channels through which respect and understanding could be engendered that was identified by the Commission and by the high-level submissions made to the work of the Commission.
- 197 Thinking strategically about education, and especially about *how* to deliver education as a suitable intervention means several different things. It is helpful to break these down:
- *Educational participation* itself can be an important symptom of embedded inequality and lack of opportunity. The distribution of education shapes tendencies towards inclusion or exclusion and, thus, general patterns that are evident in a particular society. The effects on respect and understanding can be substantial, although they may be indirect in their nature. Policymakers are faced with the job of developing mechanisms to widen and deepen educational participation as a means of (a) overcoming societal tendencies to exclusion and/or (b) compensating for the injustice and/or barriers experienced by a particular group.
  - *Extending the age 'reach'* of the compulsory schooling system upwards and downwards – and implementing this effectively – is extremely important. So also is extending participation in basic education in rural communities. The use of pioneering programmes to preserve household income generated through informal child working, whilst delivering a core education programme, is another important way of extending educational participation. The 'who' aspects of education are therefore central.
  - *Educational content* is linked with the promotion of respect and understanding – or the opposite. Thus the educational curriculum is central in embodying and communicating values and messages about the relationships and understandings between and across existing identity groups. Teaching children in the compulsory schooling system about the cultural heritage of a range of ethnic and religious communities is a typical intervention based on multicultural models of stimulating appetite for knowledge. As well as giving an understanding of comparative religion and ethnic and cultural groups, it is important to teach children that there are fundamental human values that transcend religion, cultural and ethnic boundaries – the duty to treat others with respect and dignity, and to do unto others as you wish to be treated yourself.
- 198 Knowledge of world history is particularly critical in helping to forge cosmopolitan identities. Equally, teaching children about the value and purpose of social cohesion based on mutual equality is another, rather more ambitious intervention. Finally,

teaching can develop a range of ways to transfer knowledge in plural societies. Softer aspects of education are also relevant in relation to smoothing the adaptation of immigrants to their host or new home societies. The 'what' aspects of education are at the heart of all of these interventions.

- *Educational contributions* to the larger task of managing difference are important. The extent to which education plays a positive role in engendering respect for difference depends on how it is framed and used in a social context. Canadian bilingualism policies, for example, seek to go beyond expanding language usage and also offer an alternative way to think about education for all communities, irrespective of their particular identities or lines of heritage. Education in this sense is very much about preparing young – or younger – minds to live in and cope effectively with a world of various pluralisms.

199 Education is also an instrument for understanding both difference and the potential for fault-lines to descend into conflict and violence. At its most effective, education can be used to reflect on and gain a better understanding of conflict itself, insofar as knowledge can be conveyed in a way that shows that every major conflict involves an interaction between economic, political, historical and cultural factors and that in many cases, group mobilisation occurs along lines of ethnic, religious or ideological identity, which destroys ties of respect and understanding and replaces them with fear and mistrust. The 'how' aspects of education's role in shaping much larger social cohesion lie at the heart of this kind of educational approach and one interesting example, in a context where the majority of children are still educated in faith-related schools, is the Northern Ireland Education for Mutual Understanding initiative, which has been incorporated as a curriculum requirement.

200 The question of the renewal of the Commonwealth itself cannot be lightly dismissed in the context of education. Such renewal is possible only when we are able to discover and to keep re-discovering who we really are, how our lives have been forged from that textured history of hundreds of years, of which both the idea of Pax Britannica and the Commonwealth are also products.

201 Education is not just about school and college education, it is about life-long learning, including in very particular situations. Thus, for example, it includes programmes that aim to bring conflicting parties together in peace-building activities or in political education programmes in post-conflict situations.

202 Young people can and do play a role here, including as advisers and trainers. 'Education' also includes providing training support for young people to engage in and participate in governance processes – in youth organisations, trade unions, National Youth Councils and Parliaments. The Commonwealth Youth Programme has a large number of innovative programmes that encourage youth participation in a variety of functions; all seek to both inform and empower young people.

- 203 The Commission attaches importance to *quality*, relevant education, regardless of whether that education is provided by the state or not. In many countries, the non-government educational system has increased exponentially in response to lack of government resources to equip and staff government schools adequately (including valuing and remunerating teachers in ways that ensures their attendance). Bangladesh is perhaps one of the most interesting examples of this, with enormous investments by the NGO sector in children's and adult (particularly women's) education. The role of government then changes to one of providing a policy and regulatory framework, through which it can exert influence over wider educational objectives.
- 204 The Commission concluded that state policies that actively promote new faith schools, whether they are Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Hindu, may be problematic if the impact of these schools is that students learn to see the world in fragmented terms, with their faith identity setting them apart from others with different faiths or no faith at all. The proliferation of faith schools today comes at a time when prioritising religion in particular ways has been a major contributory factor to violence in many parts of the world. It is important, therefore, to insist that education is:
- '...not just about getting children, even very young ones, immersed in an old, inherited ethos. It is also about helping children to develop the ability to reason about new decisions that any grown-up person will have to take...and enhance (their) capability...to live "examined lives" as they grow up in an integrated country.'*<sup>xxiv</sup>
- 205 Whether faith or secular, public or private, the emphasis must be on providing a high-quality, rounded education that encourages respect between all peoples and does not put forward the idea that any one dogma is pre-eminent. Faith schools are able to deliver this objective, so long as blinkered dogma is not the lens for their students.
- 206 There is a need for all countries to look at the totality of their education systems, both as sources of current marginalisation but also as sources of huge potential to help overcome that marginalisation. Education is paramount in the process of promoting respect and understanding between people, and particularly the young – the leaders, followers, thinkers and doers of the future. What they are taught and how they are taught is critical.
- 207 The Commission emphasises the critical role of education, defined in its broadest sense, in engendering a feeling of respect and understanding amongst diverse populations and particularly the young. The organisations that deliver these different educational programmes are as simple as school systems and as high-level as Commonwealth forums.