

**“The Commonwealth and UNESCO - Empowering Youth”,
Commonwealth Secretary-General’s speech to UNESCO’s
Executive Board**

PARIS, 16 March 2015

Chair of the Executive Board, Ambassador Mohamed Sameh Amr;
Director-General, Madam Irina Bokova; Chair of the Commonwealth
Group, Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj; Excellencies, Ladies and
Gentlemen:

I am honoured to be given this opportunity by the Executive Board to
speak today, representing the Commonwealth, a diverse family of 53
member states which cherish the same values and are committed to
many of the same goals as UNESCO.

We are two organisations founded around the same time with a shared
vision of serving the human community in its diversity. The
Commonwealth Charter, which brings together the values, principles
and aspirations that unite the Commonwealth are ones that find
common cause with UNESCO and its vision. The variety within the
Commonwealth, embracing all continents and descriptions of human
communities, already makes it a template of the whole world.

At the heart of the Commonwealth is an assertion that democracy, inclusive development and our diversity in all its richness are the three stable pillars on which our futures lie. We are a values-based organisation.

Our association is not only about member governments; it is also about the 80-odd professional associations and other bodies through whom also our fundamental preoccupation lies with the welfare and dignity of each and all Commonwealth citizens wherever they call home. Serving them through strengthened national institutions and building social and national resilience, and advocating the cause of small and vulnerable states globally in diverse areas is our core strength. This is all well aligned with UNESCO and its missions.

It is therefore natural that the Commonwealth and UNESCO have long enjoyed an excellent collaboration, especially in equitable and durable development through education, gender and youth empowerment.

UNESCO also enjoys an excellent partnership with our sister organisation - the Commonwealth of Learning, a specialised and highly successful inter-governmental organisation focussed on open learning and distance education, based in Vancouver. It is doing remarkable work at present in creating opportunity for economic empowerment at the village level, pioneering new technologies for classrooms in remote communities, and supporting a virtual university for small states whose special vulnerabilities but remarkable resiliences too often go unremarked or unattended.

I would like to commend, in particular, the Commonwealth Group here at UNESCO, and am much obliged for its courtesies and support for this meeting. This is the only UN organisation that has such a grouping, and that says a good deal for the common ground on which our two organisations stand.

Mr Chair, there are many areas where the Commonwealth and UNESCO's work is complementary. The Commonwealth Secretariat's education team has been working on initiatives such as developing a Commonwealth Framework for Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders. We have been addressing 'education equity' in gender across the Commonwealth, in particular through interventions like Boys Underachievement in School Education in the Caribbean region.

Our Commonwealth Education Ministers, who meet every three years, will be meeting in The Bahamas in just over three months' time. This will create an opportunity at an important juncture for our membership to prioritise education issues and plans for the next 15 years in line with the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

UNESCO, as our established partner, will be welcomed and involved yet again, building on the outcomes of the World Education Forum taking place in May this year. Given the Commonwealth's focus on small states, particularly small island developing states, this would offer another opportunity for partnership in meeting their needs.

Mr Chair, I want today to focus my remarks on three contemporary themes of vital importance to our two organisations, where our partnership will surely be a great global good.

The world community is at a fundamental cross-roads. We are a globalising world, with a degree of unprecedented and swift integration in diverse areas pulling us together. And we are a rapidly compacting world as well, generating frictions and assertions of contested identity that threaten the creation of entrenched fault-lines in what should be a collective human enterprise.

Our future depends upon how we navigate our way through this collision of inherited identities pulling us apart and an emerging collective identity which is no threat to what we cherish and value in ourselves. The call on the resources of wisdom we can bring in the challenge of meeting radical manifestations of this collision will be fateful, and we must be equal to it.

In the *Commonwealth Charter*, our governments and our peoples are strongly committed to promoting tolerance, respect, understanding, moderation and religious freedom.

I remarked only a few weeks ago, at the Human Rights Council, that the struggle for all of us as we move forward in this century will be for our positive belief in our intrinsic right to rich and multiple identities to triumph over the peddling of reductionist and singular ones. Surely this is a common credo between UNESCO and the Commonwealth, and in working together this can be our contribution to global wisdom.

We are conscious of the importance of recognising that all individuals have a mutuality of respect, a multiplicity of identities reflecting their stage of life, their interests, their commitments, their beliefs, their aspirations, and much more.

Each of these become possibilities for building strong bridges over the sterile divides that are too-easily created, too-easily simplified, and too-easily exploited to our detriment as individuals who are a world in themselves. We equally affirm and treasure the unbounded cultural, intellectual and spiritual wealth of the human family.

The source of this wisdom concerning our multiple identities is the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding, chaired by the Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen, and its report, ‘Civil Paths to Peace’.

As a call to action, it states that today’s extremism, today’s radicalism, and today’s incivility can be successfully tackled through two key groups in society: the young people and women; and through two avenues of engagement: the media in all its forms and education. This is in complete harmony with the mandate of UNESCO, as the lead agency designated by the United Nations General Assembly, of advancing the culture of peace and highest human values.

The Commission said:

“The biggest gains in shaping shared narratives across potential divides will most likely come from investment in, and rethinking of, education.”

The overarching objectives of UNESCO to contribute to lasting peace through the use of dialogue, the role of education, and participation and inclusion are complementary, and offer a rich vein for partnership.

Mr Chair, my second theme pertains to the young. Those that are 29 years or under now comfortably exceed sixty percent of the population of the Commonwealth. The adults are slow to recognise that most of our societies are not predominantly adult. Political, economic, and social interventions required to secure the youth into being the nation-builders that they are calls for more than the creation of a Ministry or Department of Youth Affairs.

The Commonwealth has been prescient in the pivotal place of the young as catalysts of true change in our societies. It has the oldest youth programme of any organisation, dating from 1973. It pioneered the discipline of a professional youth qualification - a diploma now moving to a Masters degree. It created the Youth Development Index - a global first. It has led the way in youth entrepreneurship.

I am aware that UNESCO's work with and for young people is committed to empowering and helping them to work together to drive social innovation and change, to participate fully in the development of their societies, to eradicate poverty and inequality, and to foster a culture of peace.

That, to a great extent, also describes the focus of the Commonwealth Youth Programme, which is not just a recognition of the potential of young people to be the leaders of tomorrow but is also an endorsement of their role as agents of change in our societies today.

It acknowledges the critical truth that young people who have a sense of belonging and purpose in their lives are far more likely to be constructive citizens, rather than turning to outlets of negative

behaviour. True inclusion of young people comes from having economic opportunity, from their having a voice, and knowing that they are being respected as contributing members of society in all its activities.

Our future cannot be secured without igniting all round the promise of young people. The demographic reality means that the success of the Post-2015 Development Agenda requires investing in our young people. This year, in particular, is one of great opportunity as well as one of immense challenge.

The Sustainable Development Goals and targets, that will be agreed and adopted at the UN General Assembly in September, will become the world's developmental priorities for the next 15 years, and will define mobilisation of multilateral, governmental and private sector resources.

The proposed 17 goals and 169 targets in the currently proposed SDGs do not yet adequately recognise the needs or importance of our young people. Only six specifically mention young people, and only one recognises young people's capacity to act as agents of change. We should be demanding targets for the empowerment and inclusion of young people. Otherwise, we will struggle to secure adequate investment and support for the youth.

Tracking the progress of young people must also be a priority. As already alluded, the Commonwealth led the way in this by launching a first-of-its-kind global *Youth Development Index* in 2013. This has become a public resource and global benchmarking tool. The Index covers five domains of health, education, employment, civic participation, and political participation. Its first iteration highlighted the serious lack of

youth-specific data, and also the need to invest more in young people in the developing world.

The domain that most concerns governments is youth employment, and the Commonwealth has long prioritised policy solutions and strategies here, in particular youth enterprise. Since we are persuaded so clearly of the merits and potential of youth-led initiatives, the Commonwealth has facilitated the establishment of regional networks of young entrepreneurs, first in the Asia region three years ago; more recently in the Caribbean; and, we are now also turning our eyes to the African continent.

Another youth-led initiative is the Commonwealth Youth Council, now the recognised voice of young people across the Commonwealth, and believed to be the largest in the world. A ‘network of networks’, the Council’s role is to facilitate and support the work of youth-member bodies, and also work with partners in representing and empowering young people.

Mr Chair, sport plays an important part in our association’s history and shared identity, and has touched positively the lives of millions of young people around the world over multiple generations. It is no coincidence that the Commonwealth Games remains the best-known activity of the Commonwealth among young people themselves. Our Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships in the education field is the other prime brand identifier globally.

We are also proud of the Commonwealth Youth Games that were first held in 2000 - a decade earlier than their Olympic equivalent.

There is also the dimension of sport as a vector for development and peace. We commend the leadership of UNESCO's 'Declaration of Berlin'. It is an important milestone, recognising as we do sport as a socially unifying development catalyst, particularly in advancing gender equity.

The Commonwealth is likewise committed to action on Sports for Development and Peace, and has published guidance for governments on how to develop national strategies and action plans, and we have also provided practical technical support. Using the Commonwealth Games and sport as the entry point, the Secretariat has launched 'Commonwealth Class' as a vast on-line curriculum resource now embracing more than one hundred thousand schools.

Teams in both our organisations have already been progressing collaborative opportunities on the sports front, with a mutual commitment to align and jointly promote our respective work. UNESCO was a welcome contributor at the 7th Commonwealth Sports Ministers Meeting last year. We also plan to support promotion of UNESCO's recently published *Quality Physical Education Policy Guidelines* to our member governments.

Mr Chair, there are enough warning signs to suggest that unless we take urgent concerted action, the 'demographic dividend' that is so full of promise today may soon end up as a lost generation of marginalised or disenfranchised young people.

Of the burgeoning communications resources, the uncivil society is often quicker to misuse these than the civil society to use them, as the facts

of global criminality, radicalism and extremism attest. But we know that there can also be a shared vision of how to move forward collectively, and a wealth of existing and emerging toolkits that UNESCO and the Commonwealth can use as strategic partners, to which others can also be drawn to grow and mobilise this vision.

This brings me to my final theme, Mr Chair, which is the collaborative potential between the Commonwealth and UNESCO in creatively mining globally beneficial digital networking. At our forthcoming meeting of Commonwealth Education Ministers, we will be sharing a pilot initiative called the ‘Commonwealth Education Hub’.

This digital platform has two key features. First, it is a community of practice, bringing together education practitioners, policy-makers, advocates, and other interested parties in a moderated way to discuss critical issues; to be in direct liaison with each other through a virtual directory of contacts; and, crucially, to provide an on-line space for collaboration in real time.

The second feature is to be a website providing knowledge, from recent and germane education news to a library of best practice, global experience and wisdom, toolkits and country profiles to name a few.

We are calling it a non-stop, one-stop shop. To ensure that this benefits from the synergy of connectivity with other initiatives of this kind, we would be delighted to explore the possibility of collaborating on developing and sustaining this Hub in partnership with UNESCO.

Some of your existing global networks - such as the UNEVOC network for training and vocational skills, and the Global University Network for ovation - could be areas to explore together. We have supported UNESCO in some of its regional networks in the past, on such matters as the quality of teacher training in Africa, and this sort of partnership could be further strengthened through our hub, so that the webs we are weaving can be mutually reinforcing.

Mr Chair, thank you again for this valued opportunity as UNESCO looks to its future. I have been honoured by your invitation. We look forward to expanding our partnership with UNESCO with these thoughts in mind.
