

**Rt Hon Helen Clark**

***“The Importance of Education in Achieving Sustainable  
Development”***

**Keynote Address to the Opening Session of the Twentieth  
Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers.**

**Sheraton Hotel, Nadi, Fiji.**

**5 pm, Tuesday 20 February 2018**

**My thanks go to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Rt Hon  
Patricia Scotland, for inviting me to address this Twentieth  
Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) on  
the role of education in achieving sustainable development.**

**I am delighted that the Conference is being held in Fiji, a  
country which gives high priority to its participation in  
international organisations, and where challenges at the heart**

**of the global sustainable development agenda are so pressing, not least those of building resilience to adverse events such as those brought about by climate change.**

**In this respect, let me acknowledge the severe impact of Cyclone Gita which cut a swathe through the South Pacific in recent days. In Tonga and in Fiji's southern islands, it is described as the worst storm in living memory, and it caused widespread flooding and water damage in Samoa and American Samoa too.**

**The peoples of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Pacific, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean are very resilient – they have lived with extreme weather events throughout human history.**

**Climate change, however, is an existential threat to SIDS. It raises the level of threat from storms and sea water inundation significantly, and that requires building higher levels of resilience than ever before.**

**Even if the full ambition of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change is realised, we face worsening weather for decades to come. The need for solidarity with the most vulnerable nations is great. They need support for adaptation - and in the SIDS support is needed for recovery from the powerful storms which wipe out infrastructure and livelihoods, and may cause loss of life. Tonga and Fiji's southern islands have needs right now; and in the Caribbean, Dominica and Barbuda both suffered huge damage last year during a very severe cyclone season.**

**Recovery must also mean building back better – in efforts to stop the same damage happening to infrastructure and in loss of life as happened before.**

**We must also acknowledge the ever more severe weather events affecting Africa. There, prolonged droughts, compounded by other factors, have brought some regions in some countries to the brink of famine in the past year, requiring major domestic and international responses.**

**In the far south of the continent, Cape Town faces the prospect of becoming the first city in modern times to run out of water after three years of drought. Let us hope that the worst-case scenario for Cape Town can be averted, but, even if it is, the message is clear: governments at all levels must be better informed about all conceivable risks and put in place credible measures to manage them.**

**The theme for this Conference is “*Sustainability and Resilience: Can Education Deliver?*” The short answer is that, yes, it can – and it must. We live in an age of turmoil and uncertainty. We need education to play its full part in equipping current and future generations of citizens to rise to the challenges which face our world. That means that education has a role to play, not only in meeting the targets of the education SDG, SDG4, but also in contributing to progress on all the other SDGs.**

***So, let’s consider the task ahead!***

**First, can I commend the Commonwealth Secretariat for its excellent work in preparing the papers for this CCEM and those which have preceded it.**

**The Secretariat and its associated organisations were at the forefront of debate about the shape of the new global agenda for sustainable development – Agenda 2030 and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).**

**Back in 2012 in Mauritius, the 18<sup>th</sup> CCEM set up a working group to provide input on the place of education in the post-2015/post MDGs framework.**

**Your 19<sup>th</sup> CCEM in the Bahamas agreed on an agenda to promote Education for Sustainable Development.**

**Now this 20<sup>th</sup> CCEM focuses on key themes to take the 2030 Agenda forward by:**

- **developing education as a key enabler for sustainable development;**
- **building resilience through education; and**
- **enhancing teaching, management, and financing to meet these objectives.**

**Throughout, the CCEMs have grounded their work in the Commonwealth's values of equity, access, and development. Your efforts are also mirrored in the work of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, of which I am patron, and which has done so much to promote action on, first, the Millennium Development Goals, and, now, the Sustainable Development Goals, across subnational governments in Commonwealth Countries.**

**Many speakers at this CCEM will address detailed issues of education strategy, delivery, and funding. I will therefore direct**

**my comments to the overarching issue of how education can contribute to achieving sustainable development. I will address three interlinked objectives of the agenda:**

- its fundamental premise that no one should be left behind in development;**
- its objective of achieving high human development for all in ways which don't imperil our planet further; and**
- the need to achieve peace as a prerequisite for sustainable development and sustainable development as a prerequisite for peace.**

### ***1. Leaving No One Behind***

**Yes – our world is healthier, better educated, and wealthier than ever before, but the *inequalities* between us are huge – within many countries and between countries. High inequality is never a recipe for peace and harmony at home or globally.**



**Many strategies are available to fight inequality – and successful approaches will be comprehensive ones.**

**An indispensable component of those strategies will be *quality education for all*, enabling each human being to reach their full potential and contribute to society.**

**In the Commonwealth, it's estimated that thirteen million primary school-age children are not in school, and twenty million of secondary age aren't either. Four hundred million Commonwealth adults are illiterate.**

**Each of those people has been left behind by the society of which they are part. That isn't good enough. Each human being denied education is a human being denied opportunity – and is being denied the right to education enshrined in the Universal**

**Declaration of Human Rights which has its seventieth anniversary this year.**

**While the world has made tremendous progress towards *gender equality* in education, the *girl child* still faces particular barriers. Each year some fifteen million girls are married before the age of eighteen – that’s estimated to be 28 girls every minute, or one every two seconds.**

**Many of these girls have not been able to finish their education. Early pregnancy is among the leading causes of death for girls aged fifteen to nineteen worldwide. And child brides face a significantly higher risk of contracting HIV.**

**But turn that around by enabling every girl to complete her education and make her own choices about her life. That helps to:**

***-reduce poverty.*** UNESCO has estimated that each extra year of schooling is associated with increased earnings of up to ten per cent.

***- reduce maternal deaths, and reduce child mortality too.*** A child born to a mother who can read is estimated to be fifty per cent more likely to live beyond the age of five.

***- turn the tide on HIV*** – research suggests that women with post-primary education are five times more likely to be knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS than are women who are illiterate.

**What these simple facts tell us is that education is a *foundation for development*. Invest in it, ensure everyone has a right to it,**

**and we enable people to live better lives. Whole societies benefit too. *That's why no one must be left behind.***

**And for those who have missed out to date, investing in basic literacy and other skills will help transform lives.**

**There's another major challenge too. We are bombarded now with information about what is termed the *Fourth Industrial Revolution* and the potential for *disruptive technologies* to change the world of work and services as we know them. Technological change won't stop – the issue is how to enable people to take advantage of it and not be left behind in this new era.**

**We human beings have proved remarkably adept at adapting to previous periods of technological change. For this one, the**

**contribution of our education systems needs to be at the forefront. People will need broad skills and high digital literacy, and their capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship will need to be developed further to create the world of work of the future.**

**When I was New Zealand's Prime Minister a decade ago, we used to say that eighty per cent of our country's five-year olds would be doing jobs which had not yet been invented. That was before Snapchat, Instagram, and Uber began, and Airbnb was just being founded. Now Uber drivers face the prospect of being made redundant by the driverless car, and lawyers, accountants, and service and manufacturing workers of all kinds will see many of their skills replicated by artificial intelligence.**

**Education will have a critical role to play in helping us ride the wave of these changes. Not investing in education for this new world will see not only individuals but also whole countries left behind. We owe it to our citizens to give them the best chance they can to be able to participate fully in the economies and societies of the future. We will also have to innovate in social policy and income distribution, but that's a topic for another speech!**

## ***2. Providing for people and planet***

**Achieving sustainable development requires us to think and act holistically. We can be proud of the significant human development gains made in our world, but they've been made at a terrible cost to our *ecosystems*.**

**The health of our oceans, our forests, our water supply, our climate, and our biodiversity are all at risk from the way we have developed.**

**The environment is not an infinite resource which just keeps on supplying the natural services we depend on – it can be damaged beyond repair. Of the nine recognised planetary boundaries, it's said that we have already exceeded two, and have passed the safe operating space of two more, including of our climate.**

**On the basis of commitments made to date by countries on addressing *climate change*, we cannot meet the ambition of the Paris Agreement. Indeed, the latest draft report of the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* suggests that the 1.5 degree Celsius limit in global warming above pre-industrial levels would be exceeded by the 2040s. Other research suggests that on current trends there is only a five per cent chance that**

**the Earth will limit warming to 2 degrees Celsius by the end of this century. Without urgent action to curb emissions, we are careering towards a 3-4 Celsius future. The consequences of that for cyclone- and drought-prone countries, and indeed for us all, would be catastrophic.**

**The harm we are doing to our ecosystems now threatens to undermine the human development gains we've made. That was recognised in the 2011 *UNDP Human Development Report on Sustainability and Equity* which forecast that on a worst-case scenario, which is not improbable unless we take a radical change in direction, improvements in human development would slow to a crawl and likely regress in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.**

**More recently, the *Rockefeller-Lancet Commission on Planetary Health* found that continuing environmental degradation**



**threatens to reverse the health gains made over the past century.**

**It stated that “*we have been mortgaging the health of future generations to realise economic and development gains in the present*”. Development as we have known it is badly out of balance.**

**So, never before has the need been more urgent for education for sustainable development.**

**This could take many forms. For example, the immediate past President of the UN General Assembly, His Excellency Peter Thomson of Fiji, advocated for the inclusion of the Sustainable Development Goals in education curricula. He is right – if we place the new global agenda at the heart of education, we have a chance of future generations avoiding the mistakes current and previous generations have made.**

**Learners should be enabled to understand our world as a complex ecosystem with finite resources, but also with infinite human capacity to rise to challenges and find solutions if given the opportunity and enabled to acquire the skills and means to do so.**

**Education can empower each of us and our societies to find ways of lifting prospects for all within the boundaries which nature has given us. If new generations can incorporate these ways of thinking and acting in their value systems, then our common future will become much brighter than it may seem right now.**

### ***3. Peace and Sustainable Development***

**The 2030 Agenda is clear – there can be no peace without sustainable development and no sustainable development without peace.**

**Countries mired in conflict can't get ahead. Lives are lost. Services are curtailed. People flee their homes and communities. Often the environment suffers too as people turn to endangered wildlife for food and scarce tree cover for firewood. And there are spillover effects to neighbouring countries. Some members of the Commonwealth are experiencing these serious effects right now.**

**When everyday life is disrupted like this, schooling is one of the first services to suffer. Take the severe impact of Boko Haram on education in North East Nigeria. Children literally risked their lives to be at school. Some were kidnapped and some of those are now dead. Many, it seems, were forced into early marriage to Boko Haram fighters. These are heart-rending stories.**

**Think too of the toll of the so-called Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda and other states on which it predated.**

**Or think of the children of South Sudan right now – in over four years of violence, more than three million people have been displaced. Over a million have fled across the border – most to Uganda, a Commonwealth country which needs international solidarity to cope with the needs this creates. Seventy per cent of those refugees are children. All up, UNICEF tells us that half of South Sudan's children are not in school – the highest proportion of out of school children in any country in the world.**

**Our responses to these crises focus of necessity on the short-term needs, but that should not be to the exclusion of addressing the underlying issues.**

**That is one reason why the global sustainable development agenda has a goal dedicated to achieving peaceful and inclusive societies based on the rule of law. This SDG16 is sweeping in its reach, with targets ranging from promoting representative, responsive, and honest governance, to reducing all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere.**

**UNESCO from its outset has promoted peace through education. At its best education should promote tolerance, mutual understanding and respect, and inclusion. Those are building blocks for a more peaceful world.**

**As well, I suggest, we must engage young people in the search for solutions. Let's listen to what they have to say about how their societies could be made more peaceful and inclusive. Our schools are the places to encourage young people to think outside the box, to question, to challenge, and to propose**

**solutions. Governments may not always be comfortable with that, but in a world where 1.8 billion citizens are aged between ten and 24, we ignore youth at our peril.**

**Access to education and skills training can play a big part in building peace. Educated and skilled citizens form part of a virtuous cycle of development. Where people are marginalised and denied hope, education, and opportunity, can we be surprised that negative options become attractive? Unfortunately, we can think of many circumstances where crime in the forms of terrorism and trafficking does pay and where legitimate livelihoods are limited. We need to address the fundamental drivers of these problems, and not just their symptoms. In achieving the peace required for sustainable development, education has a major role to play.**

***In conclusion***

**I am excited by the drive of the Commonwealth to work for sustainable development. I applaud the focus at a series of Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers on how education can contribute to that.**

**The challenges our world faces are great – and they can seem daunting. But we can't walk away from them. Each of us and each of our communities and countries can make a difference for a better world. Fundamental to making that difference is investing in education as a driver of inclusion and of human and sustainable development. The impacts of that will be felt far beyond measures of educational achievement, important as they are. The knowledge and skills gained will help all countries achieve the vision of the 2030 Agenda for a world without poverty and conflict, where no one is left behind, and where we achieve progress within nature's boundaries.**