

Transformative education and sustainable development in small states: Building resilience through skills and livelihoods

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2015 took place on 23-26 November 2015 and was jointly organised by the Government of Malta (host) and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2015 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of "What Makes Resilient Societies?" It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF2015 series elaborates on the issues covered in the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience.

The Commonwealth Context

The Commonwealth has always held a unique position where the future of small states is concerned; of the 52 Commonwealth members, 30 are small states. Of those, 24 are small island developing states (SIDS). In fact, two thirds of the world's small states are in the Commonwealth, and all small states collectively account for one quarter of votes at the United Nations General Assembly.

Small states have distinctive common features that contributed to commonalities despite this great diversity. The commonalities exist in the economic and social domains, proving a framework for development that offers unique opportunities for innovation and new pathways to development, and these have implications for education. Small States have an early pattern of shifting educational priorities beyond matters of access and towards issues of retention, quality, equity, inclusion and skills training. This has generated insightful and valuable experience from which others can learn.

Contemporary priorities flag how small states can respond to major external shocks and challenges within environment, economic, cultural and political domains. This ability to respond – their capacity to be resilient – lies at the heart of sustainability, and the role of education is critical to that ability.

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Commonwealth civil society with the support of the Commonwealth Foundation has taken the lead on this exploration. Civil society's proposals were submitted as a statement to – and in many instances adopted by – the 19th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CEM), held in the, Bahamas in June 2015. These proposals identify successes achieved in the drive for strengthened education systems including

universal primary education; but also note that much work remains to achieve equitable provision and quality, to establish sustainable models of education which enable accountability and effective systems of governance and which meet the needs of all earners, regardless of gender, race, religion, or other aspects of marginalization.

Meeting five months later in Malta, at the Commonwealth Peoples' Forum (CPF) during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and immediately following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Commonwealth civil society in small states continued the discussion on how education could expand the small state capacity to be resilient and arrived at the notion of transformative education in which resilience is built through skills and livelihoods.

Issues and Challenges

Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies lifelong learning (LLL) as the key education master concept for policy development. Therefore, reconceptualising LLL is a way to make policy meaningful for the achievement of transformative education and sustainable development, broadening it beyond areas of employability and the economy. This has implications for a globalised curriculum not only for small states but also for developed countries. LLL has been reduced to a very economic view, though not in all countries; and this has implications for a globalized curriculum.

There is a clear need to identify and highlight prevailing education and schooling gaps, as well as gaps in providing high quality support to children in particular. It is also essential to provide support to those not in education and employment; and to discuss other challenges in building transformative education systems and policies, including considering the role of student participation and developing a strategic approach to the pursuit of LLL.

Designing a broad balanced curriculum aiming to offer skills for life

It is being acknowledged that a broad balanced curriculum, serves as an important component

in transformation and achieving sustainable development. The curriculum needs to be all embracing; and so needs to include all stakeholders in its design.

A curriculum must address the challenges of youth employment, focusing on entrepreneurial skills, agriculture and the informal sector. International Labour Organisation (ILO) data indicates that 74 million people in the 16-24 age group are unemployed. However, the ultimate aim of a curriculum has to go beyond the functional goal of employability.

The broader goal should be education for life skills. More home education teachers are needed in schools as they have training in the application of knowledge: to improve the quality of life; and understand how to manage challenges. This needs a larger scale culture shift in society, with learning focusing on the quality of life.

The combination of local knowledge systems and modern technology with curricula appropriate to different communities is essential. Experience from Kiribati; showed that a successful new curriculum was designed based on what communities and people were doing out of school. Processes that integrate the views of different stakeholders in the designs of a curriculum are also key. In the Bahamas there is a consultative multi-sectorial process to develop a National Development Plan which includes education.

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Bridging the gap between disabled and non-disabled children by including communication skills into education from early childhood years, is key to ensure meaningful communication and address the needs of children with disabilities.

Offering education for all

Fully informed bottom-up approaches to policy formulation and practice that acknowledge the presence and voices of all social groups in prioritising their needs fairly and equitably are an important foundation. It also requires enabling

political processes that underpin educational development and social responsibility. Migration is a pressing issue for educationalists.

In global curricula and mainstream academic discourse, citizenship is celebrated, while migrants and ration are problematized. In this context citizenship is an exclusionary tool and needs to be recognized as such. A resilient society needs to be inclusive. Challenging dynamics of exclusion in education is a key fundamental of the cultural shift promoted by transformative learning.

Environmental justice, happier livelihoods, & quality of life as ingredients of transformative education

An emphasis on the right to livelihood is a prerequisite to inclusive and transformative education. Given conditions such as pollution, climate change, depletion of ecosystems, lack of fresh water, and drought, transformative education – not a degree - is needed to prepare citizens to find solutions. This challenges the prevalence of the need and demand for increasingly higher levels of degree certification, that often do not address the pressing issues.

There is also the need to promote resilient systems that share knowledge, experience and good practices. In doing so, schools should to have ownership, through communities of leaders, teachers, parents and students. These communities must be empowered to make decisions responding to their specific challenges and can define quality delivery and success through multiple means. Building the capacity of school leaders and developing leadership roles that can respond to innovative initiatives at the community level is recommended.

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Another key ingredient of transformative education is building in young people and women the awareness that they can make a difference in their communities. It is especially important that those young people who obtain a university education, understand that there are services which they, as graduates, can render to society to the benefit of all. This includes offering

services to secondary schools in support of the development of leadership skills.

Attention was drawn to policies enforcing transformative education. It was considered that policy making for transformative education should not only be informed by decision makers, but that those affected by the policies.

Encouraging critical thinking through basic literacy and experiential learning within the context of existing curricula/national education frameworks is also key to promote the attitudinal change that transformative education must foster. This can be enabled by a policy which offers and encourages a safe space for critical thinking without fear.

Policy Recommendations

- Education and Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Development should be re-conceptualized. This requires of a new curriculum focusing on building skills for life and not limited to employment and economy.
- Policies are paramount to drive the change towards transformative education. However, these should be part of political processes which are able to a) bring on board both bottom-up and top-down approaches and b) acknowledge the voices of disabled people and other unheard voices of people in the margins.
- The quality of education for all should be a fundamental pillar to build resilient societies. Citizenship should not be used as a tool for exclusion in resilient societies.
- Education policies that emphasize the relationships between communities (especially so in the Pacific), indigenous knowledge and the natural systems communities rely on and live in are needed to achieve transformative learning. These policies play a crucial role in building socio-environment justice and sustainable livelihoods.
- A first step towards transformative education is overcoming the fear of change. This may be facilitated by introducing policies designed to encourage critical thinking.

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