

**Honourable Danny Faure, President of Seychelles**

**Keynote Address at the 9<sup>th</sup> Pan-Commonwealth Forum in Edinburgh, Scotland**

**September 10, 2019**

### **‘Empowered Youth: our Common Wealth’**

As a longtime friend and supporter of the Commonwealth of Learning, I am pleased to be here today. I have seen at first-hand the successes of this trailblazing organisation from its early days when I was a Minister of Education to when I had the privilege to serve on the COL Board of Governors a few years ago. And it was an honour when the COL Honorary Fellowship was conferred on me at the 7<sup>th</sup> Pan-Commonwealth Forum in Nigeria. COL has grown from strength to strength and is making a difference to the lives of thousands of citizens around the Commonwealth.

According to UNICEF data, on this day some 395,000 children will be born across the world. By the time they become young adolescents in 2030, they will expect to see a beautiful and equitable world where they can thrive and realise their full potential.

From reducing inequality to improving health and education to spurring economic growth – while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests - they will expect us to make significant strides in meeting the global sustainable development agenda.

And yet today’s reality is starkly different. Our youth are confronted with issues stemming from the disparities between the “haves” and “have nots,” conflict and climate change, to name but a few.

According to the latest World Youth Report, around the world 15% of young people live below the poverty line. In Africa, the situation is most dire – with close to half of the young people in Middle Africa, 42% in Western Africa and a third in Eastern Africa subsisting on less than \$ US1.90 a day.

According to the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy on youth, 408 million young people are living in contexts affected by armed conflict.

And climate change is no longer a distant threat – it affects the health and livelihoods of millions. For example, every year nearly 40 million children have their education disrupted by natural disasters or disease. When cyclone Idai hit Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe this March, 600 schools were damaged with an adverse impact on hundreds of thousands of children.

What can we do in the face of these global challenges? How can we ensure that those born today have a better and safer world tomorrow? And how can we empower youth to become agents of change – for peace, security, justice, climate resilience and sustainable development for all?

The theme of this PCF is “Innovations for Quality Education and Lifelong Learning,” and I would like to explore how education can help address these key challenges for our youth.

We have a young Commonwealth, where 60 % of the population is under the age of 30. Quite rightly then, the Commonwealth Charter commits to creating ‘opportunities for youth employment and entrepreneurship’

India has a median age of 27 and Africa is the youngest continent with a median age of 19. How can we change this demographic fact into a demographic dividend? How can education help?

Let me refer to the 3 As which Blandford and other scholars have referred to: Aspiration, Access and Achievement.

Thanks to technology, our youth are more aware than ever before of the opportunities that this 'brave new world' can provide. Today's youth are more aspirational than their forefathers because they know that with the right education and the right opportunities, anything is possible.

Both boys and girls are aspirational but in many communities girls' education is hampered by the lack of aspiration among the family and the community. In Australia "Raising the educational aspirations of young people is a key component of current educational reforms supporting the achievement of targets for higher education participation. This is because a 'lack of aspiration' has been identified as one of the barriers to participation in further study for rural and remote students and those from indigenous and lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bradley et al. 2008; James et al. 2008)". ([https://www.ncver.edu.au/data/assets/word\\_doc/0021/8535/role-of-aspirations-2710.doc](https://www.ncver.edu.au/data/assets/word_doc/0021/8535/role-of-aspirations-2710.doc))

While raising the aspirations of young people is important, it is not enough—we need to raise the aspirations of entire societies and communities so that an enabling ecosystem of aspiration and achievement can be created.

COL's projects and programmes such as Lifelong Learning for Farmers and Girls Inspire project show that education should be demand driven in which families, communities and educational institutions motivate the youth to aspire for quality education and learning. The youth with high levels of aspiration can create a demand for quality education. Studies have shown that the culture of *aspiration* leads to better learning outcomes.

However, it would be dangerous to create aspiration without providing proper *access* to education. Supporting young people's access to quality education is central to ensuring a full and productive life that contributes to sustainable development. Quality education helps develop the necessary skills for the future of work, and instills the foundations of conflict prevention, civic engagement and environmental stewardship.

ACCESS is the key word here, as we know full well that across the Commonwealth and beyond millions of young people are denied this basic human right. According to UNESCO, one in five children, adolescents and youth is currently out of school, with the highest rates in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia.

To improve access, we need to think outside the box and beyond "brick and mortar" approaches. We need to think in terms of open, distance and technology enabled learning, which are tried and tested mechanisms for ensuring that learning can take place at any time and in any place – and this includes formal, non-formal, informal learning opportunities. Access also means ensuring that young people have access to quality educational resources that are truly open and free. Both the Commonwealth of Learning and the Open University are pioneers in the field of open and distance education—they have proved that the use of technology can not only open up access to larger numbers but can also cut costs and enhance quality. Open and distance learning can not only

increase access to formal education but also to lifelong learning—and we need to harness the potential of this mode if we mean to achieve SDG 4 by 2030.

In Seychelles, facilitating cost-effective access to education through open education resources (OER) is ingrained in our five-year education and training policy. Seychelles is in the process of further establishing itself as a member of the “Information Communication Society.”

As policy makers, we need to foster inclusive educational environments that reach excluded and marginalized groups and respect the diverse needs of young people.

Access by itself is not enough: Quality education should empower the learners to not only achieve material progress but also enable them to strengthen their self-respect, self-efficacy, resilience and contribute to the sustainable development of their community and their society. Achievement, thus is not merely the successful completion of educational courses. Achievement refers to the ability to become lifelong learners. As Martin Luther King said that intelligence plus character, is true achievement.

Equally important is the issue of providing quality education to everyone—not just to those in privileged schools and urban centres. For me personally, quality education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means, first and foremost, education that adequately prepares young people for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and enables them to live a life of dignity. And yet as stated in the UN Youth Strategy: “Traditional education systems and training programmes have done little to resolve the often significant mismatch between the skills new entrants possess and those required by employers in today’s rapidly evolving global economy.”

Channeling the talents of young people to productive use helps reduce economic inequality and eliminate poverty. Ultimately, work is foundational to economic stability and prosperity.

We can only speculate what the workplace of tomorrow will look like, and what specific skillsets will be in demand with advances in automation and, increasingly artificial intelligence (AI). But what we do know is that curiosity, critical thinking, and adaptability will be critical for ensuring access to livelihoods. And we need to make sure that our education systems set our young people up for success by building these 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

The success of our youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will also be measured by how well they care for the environment. As a representative of a small island nation that is among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, I cannot underestimate the importance of education in instilling environmental stewardship.

Seychelles has taken up a leadership role in promoting the blue economy as the so-called small states are actually large ocean states. In collaboration with the Blue Economy Institute at the University of Seychelles, COL has developed an online course on this important subject and I hope this will be further expanded to providing skills training in different aspects of the blue economy.

These are ambitious tasks, and no one can do this alone. This is especially true for the small states, and in our Commonwealth they are the majority. I have always been a champion of working collaboratively to build the human-resource capacity of our youth.

We have excellent examples of such collaborations. COL's Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is a network of small countries that work collaboratively to expand access to post-secondary education in their countries and improve its quality. VUSSC works with national institutions of Member Countries to build capacity and expertise in online collaboration, eLearning and information and communication technologies (ICT).

These are just a few examples of what can be done. As policy makers, it is our duty to create enabling environments for our young people to become global citizens and global leaders.

As the UN Youth Strategy states: "The way in which the shifting demographics in the world are leveraged, and how young people navigate their transition into adulthood, are critical for the progress of humankind and the health of the planet. With this large and increasing number of young people across the globe, it is abundantly clear that it is only by engaging and working with them, supporting them in standing up for their rights and creating the conditions allowing them to progress and play an active role, that the international community will be able to achieve peace, security, justice, climate resilience and sustainable development for all."

I would like to end with a call to action - We need to continue to work together and as we move into the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution, we need to harness the power of technologies to empower our youth to be leaders of a prosperous and sustainable world. This is critical for the progress of humankind and the health of our planet.