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Remarks by Edwin Laurent at the opening of the Ramphal Institute Symposium
Education and the Sustainable Development Goals in the Commonwealth and Beyond:
Shifting the Discourse

Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9BD, 26-27th April, 2016

Dr. Christopher Berry, Head of Profession for Education at DFID, Ms. Karen Ford-Warner, Registrar, Open Campus, University of the West Indies, Dr. David Edwards, Deputy General Secretary, Education International, Ms. Christine Blower, General Secretary, UK National Union of Teachers, Chair and members of the Ramphal Institute Board of Trustees, policy-makers, researchers and educators, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to this International Symposium organized by The Ramphal Institute in association with Education International, Belgium on the Theme of “Education and the Sustainable Development Goals in the Commonwealth and Beyond: Shifting the Discourse”

I am particularly pleased to welcome those of you who have travelled so far to get here.

Let me acknowledge sincere appreciation to our hosts the National Union of Teachers and Education International for their generosity and support for the symposium. Also the hard work and persistence of Roli and our Education advisers, Casmir, Kim and Sadhana.

Not all of you might be familiar with the Ramphal Institute. We bear the name of Sir Shridath Ramphal and continue his pioneering and courageous struggle for development and global justice. The world has moved on; South Africa’s apartheid is history; the east/west split of the cold war is over; and new economic powerhouses like China, India and Brazil are emerging. However, whilst today’s problems are different they are seemingly as intractable as those the world faced in the 1980’s and 1990’s, but just as back then, successfully tackling them, needs vision and statesmanship as well as new thinking and a willingness to challenge the status quo and orthodox and moribund approaches when they do not actually yield results.

We undertake research and knowledge-sharing to inform policy debate and public opinion that can help make international and national policy and regulatory environments more conducive to sustainable development. Our ability to do that has been greatly enhanced by our collaboration with King’s College London from where we operate, though legally distinct and academically independent.

But how did we arrive at the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? You might ask.

Just over a year ago we conducted a Focus Group to consider where and how the Institute could be of most value. Among the questions that we addressed were the extent to which

international cooperation is actually bringing development? Did the MDGs really work? Will the SDGs fare any better?

We recognised that the comprehensive 17 UN agreed SDGs targets and indicators constitute a policy framework for the direction of international efforts to advance economic and social development and environmental sustainability. To be successful, it is imperative that countries are able to devise and implement appropriate and informed policies and adequately manage their commitments. This poses a particular challenge for many, especially LDCs and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) that have limited institutional and other capabilities. They will need external support if they are to make sufficient progress and benefit from the SDG programme.

Better information that will strengthen policy making both in those developing countries and at the international level is essential. This needs targeted research, direct advice, guidance and outreach that would, among other things, help those countries to devise the policies and measures needed to help them achieve their SDGs.

SDG 4 has a unique character among the 17 Goals.

In developing countries, Education transforms lives; it is the route to a better future for the individual, but also the wider society. Better educated populations are essential if these countries are to be able to address the other 16 goals and successfully tackle their development challenges. SDG 4 "Education for all" is an enabler.

If a people are not educated, where will the entrepreneurs, managers and skilled labour force that will drive economic growth come from? The medical and sanitation workers, who will help keep the population healthy and reduce maternal and infant mortality.

Education is essential if the ignorance and prejudice that drives the abominable discrimination against girls and women in too many societies is to be overcome, their equal value appreciated and they are given full chance to participate and contribute.

Also a literate and informed population can hold government to account better than one that is not.

This is why working on Goal 4 - *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*, is so important. We recognise that, and during the SDG preparations last year, the Institute had, via Education International contributed to the consultation document of the UNESCO Technical Advisory Group on the Education Indicators.

There are limits to what the Institute can do, after all we are not an intergovernmental organisation that can take direct action; but we can be a catalyst. Sadly, in recent years, we have seen institutions shifting focus and resources away from education even if this is an area of such vital importance to their developing country members. Maybe this could be down to myopic and uninspired leadership, but whatever the explanation, they must reengage if they are not to short change their members and we encourage any progress in this direction.

This symposium is the first major event of our work on Education and the SDGs, and I look forward to the outcomes that will inform and guide our future work programme.