



AFRICA COMMISSION

THEMATIC CONFERENCE ON: *THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE*

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 16 June 2008

**Welcome Address by
Commissioner Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas
President, ECOWAS Commission**

Your Excellency Minister for Basic Education and Literacy of Burkina Faso

Honourable Ministers of Education here present

Fellow Members of the Africa Commission and co-hosts of this conference, (Ms Ellen Margrethe Loj, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Liberia; and Dr. Louritz Holm-Nielsen, Rector of the University of Aarhus, Denmark).

Government representatives

Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Members of the Secretariat of the Africa Commission

Distinguished Experts in Education and Youth matters here present

Representatives of the private sector and Civil Society,

Gentlemen of the Press

Ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the Africa Commission, I welcome you all to this conference on the educational challenge. I also bring you greetings from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the good people of the Community.

For many years the youth question has posed a major challenge to the development and security in Africa and other developing parts of the world. Constituting about 60% of the population of Africa and lacking adequate educational and employment opportunities, young people have also fallen become prey to warlords, extremist groups and criminal networks that have over the years undermined efforts to promote good governance, economic development, peace and security.

Aware of the inter-relationship between access to education and youth empowerment several global, continental and regional consultations have taken place in the past on the best ways to promote quality education for the young. However, the developing world is yet to device effective linkages between education, youth employment and poverty reduction.

The Africa Commission was established by the Danish Government with the objective of making international development cooperation responsive to the developmental needs of Africa with youth employment as its cardinal focus. The Commission, which is chaired by the Danish Prime Minister, is composed of 18 prominent statesmen and women as well as prominent personalities and high achievers from diverse fields of endeavour from Africa and Denmark. It was inaugurated in April 2008 in Copenhagen.

From this conference until November 2008, the Commission is expected to prepare a policy recommendation paper to guide the Governments intervention in Africa in favour of youth empowerment and employment. Towards this end, five thematic conferences have been scheduled with a view to crystallizing concrete and pertinent inputs to the eventual policy paper. This conference on the educational challenge constitutes the first step in this direction.

It is indeed my pleasure to be a member of this innovative Commission. I am equally most pleased with the active participation of the ECOWAS Education Ministers and respected experts of our region as well as representatives of Civil Society, the private sector and research institutions in this maiden thematic conference. Our primary objective here is to come out with concrete proposal on the most effective means of transforming the educational system to meet the challenges of sustainable employment opportunities for the African youth.

The centrality of education to the development of Africa is beyond question. Education is a key part of strategies to improve individuals' well-being and societies' economic and social development; above all education must be capable of nurturing autonomous individuals that can contribute to the positive transformation of our communities.

This realization motivated ECOWAS to adopt the Protocol on Education and Training in 2003 and the Ministers to adopt priority programmes including Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET); and to set up centres dedicated to Youth and Gender challenges, in Ouagadougou and Dakar respectively. It is also the motivational factor behind the Africa Commission.

Despite the political will of our leaders and the efforts of our institutions, education in Africa continues to be dogged by daunting obstacles. These include but are not limited to funding constraints, limited access, low quality, weak Monitoring of Learning Achievements, HIV/AIDS, gender inequality and mismatch between qualifications and gainful employment. It is my earnest hope that a holistic approach to education as envisaged by this conference, which addresses the expected learning targets at different levels and their correlation to employment **potential** will go a long way in addressing the numerous challenges facing education in Africa.

Let me take this opportunity to once more express my gratitude to the Africa Commission Secretariat and the Government of Denmark for its initiative to accompany Africa in resolving the Youth crisis. I would also like to express our profound appreciation to His Excellency Blaise Compaore, President of Faso and chair of ECOWAS, and the people of Burkina Faso for the warm hospitality and the excellent facilities put at our disposal for this conference.

I wish all of you a wonderful stay and productive interaction in this beautiful and historic city of Ouagadougou.

Thank you for your attention.