

Address
by Dr James A. Maraj
Director, Education Division, Commonwealth Secretariat

Mr Chairman, Honourable Prime Minister, Your Excellencies, Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen:

We have met this morning in the pleasant surroundings of Kuala Lumpur to mark the opening of the Commonwealth Asia-Pacific Regional Youth Seminar. Many of you are extremely busy at this period but you have taken time off from your several occupations to come and witness this opening, and in appreciation of your presence I feel that there is perhaps need for someone from the Commonwealth Secretariat to put the Seminar into perspective. I do this not only in recognition of your presence, but also because there has been no dearth of seminars in this region on the topic of youth activities and I suppose we ought to justify the present meeting.

At the Heads of Government Meeting in 1969, Commonwealth Heads of Government instructed the Secretariat to undertake surveys and studies and to embark on a programme of work related to youth. Nine months later, the Secretariat, following a survey in Commonwealth Africa, mounted a seminar of this kind in Nairobi and nine months thereafter a similar exercise was undertaken in the Caribbean. In January 1971 Commonwealth Heads of Government commended us for the initiatives we had taken and suggested that our work in the youth field should be expanded. They also instructed us to organise the present seminar which is the third and final in the series. Commonwealth Heads of Government further instructed us to convene, at the earliest opportunity, a full meeting at ministerial level to review the whole complex of youth problems. This is scheduled for 1972.

By way of providing justification for yet another youth seminar, let me indicate, that we are not unaware of the valuable national and international meetings which have been held in this region on this topic in recent years. On these meetings, especially those convened by the United Nations agencies, we have drawn heavily. Since we started along this road, Mr Chairman, we have learned many lessons, we have gained new insights, and many dimensions of the problem have become somewhat clearer. It is on the basis of such experiences that we have decided, on this occasion, to sharpen the focus and to concentrate on the role of youth in the development process.

It might be asked why we have decided to concentrate on this particular aspect. The only answer I can give you at this time is that the Commonwealth Secretariat exists to meet the needs and demands of Commonwealth countries, and we are responding in this way to the challenges facing governments in their attempts to meet the expectations of youth for closer involvement in the development of their society.

Within the general theme of the role of youth in national development, the Seminar will deal with three major elements. We have called these youth problems, youth training and employment. I need hardly remind a distinguished audience such as this that the issues with which we are dealing are very complex indeed. I would hasten to add, however, that the issues are intertwined and that solutions to them will require an integrated, systematic and total approach. It is my submission, Mr Chairman, that no piecemeal or ad hoc activity will suffice.

Allow me for a moment to attempt to illustrate some of the complexities which I believe underlie this field. We are told that people are maturing much earlier, in the sense that the physiological concomitants of maturity seem to appear much sooner. Attention has been drawn in previous work to the large dependency ratios; because of the greater proportion of young people in the population, there are increasingly more people relying on the breadwinners. I should also like to draw attention to the fact that in the East you are perhaps more fortunate in having held on to some of your traditions than those of us who have subscribed throughout our lives to a more westernised pattern. It is not without significance, I think, that youth finds itself with a sort of schizophrenic self-image. On the one hand, we treat young people as though they are children, yet we expect them to behave as if they are adults. In other situations, they are treated as adults, yet we require from them a kind of childish subservience. The transition from childhood to adulthood, too, is much less marked in western culture: there are no fixed criteria or rites of passage, as it were, such as are known to exist in the East and elsewhere.

I would like to inform this distinguished gathering that considerations of a demographic kind will play a large part in this Seminar. In attempting to develop a total approach we must be careful not to disregard the structure of the population - the structure in terms of class or ethnic groups, the distribution of the population in terms of the age make-up, or the rural/urban

distribution, or patterns of migration, either internal and external. The fact that the population is expected to be doubled in twenty years cannot be brushed aside in our deliberations.

The Seminar must also give some attention to concepts of development. What are appropriate models? How much longer will we continue to import from more developed societies or rather the so-called "more developed"? How much longer shall we be subscribing to the view that modernisation necessarily means progress or that technological re-orientation is our only salvation? Are we not producing in most of these countries merely a breed of consumer societies? Is there not also the question of the pace of change and strategies for accelerating growth? And what about costs in human, personal terms, as different from those calculated by my economist friends?

I would like to draw attention, too, Mr Chairman, to the third sector of our concern. This will be a reconsideration of education. The Seminar cannot disregard the fact that many countries are now faced with having to spend as much as one-third of their annual budgets on formal education, only to find that such schooling does not necessarily solve the problems of the society. Surely the whole concept of the school must be re-examined. Isn't it a fact that those of us who read the same books and talk to the same people come to think alike and to perceive similarly? We must also ask serious questions of the universities, which, while essentially academic institutions, should also be perceived as instruments of development. This Seminar will call into question conventional patterns of education and training; it will examine the role of government and non-governmental agencies, and the tendency to look towards governments on every occasion for initiatives will also be challenged. We shall give attention, too, to the whole question of the involvement of young people in decision-making and how best this might be implemented.

There is another point to which I believe attention needs to be drawn. We are becoming a little concerned as a result of our previous experience at some trends which are evident in discussions on the youth problem. I believe it is important for us to realise that the disorientation, the dissatisfaction and the disillusion which is manifested in many societies today is not necessarily a youth problem. We seem to want to put youth into the dock and accuse it of being impatient and of being idealistic, as if these were crimes. I am inclined to the view that what we are talking about are essentially population problems, problems of people - of people who are dissatisfied and disillusioned, of people who are disoriented - and because in our societies the

population structure is such that most of these people happen to be young, these have come to be perceived as youth problems. I think it would be dangerous to isolate a section of the population, to have it studied, to have it analysed and to have it prescribed for, in the same way that I believe it is equally dangerous for some people to claim that older people are not aware of the problems of "youth". It would be a mistake to believe that those who have a prerogative on energy, vision and enthusiasm are in fact young people themselves. I should point out, Mr Chairman, that we will not be concentrating on evidences of disorientation. We are not here primarily to talk about drugs, hair styles, or dropping out. In so far as these are symptomatic of illnesses we shall attempt to treat the illnesses rather than the symptoms.

Just before the African Seminar, the Commonwealth Secretary-General reminded us that populations grow but they also grow younger. He said that social problems change and old restraints go, and when the city calls it is the countryside that loses. The swelling numbers of school-leavers and of those who have not been to school are phenomena which create a major problem for the world today. This is so not only in Asia and in the Pacific region: it exists in Europe, the Americas, the Caribbean and elsewhere. The problem is a universal one and it is by no means to be under-estimated. All thinking people, Mr Chairman, are not a little disturbed that millions of people are being radically disengaged from their traditional societies. They are rapidly becoming what Stanley Diamond called "marginals". The net result of all this is the creation of marginal producers, marginal consumers, and people who survive on the remotest fringes of what constitutes the contemporary industrial society. It is not for me, Mr Chairman, certainly not at this stage, to attempt to indicate solutions to the problems, but I would like to say that the world's unemployed and the world's underemployed would seem to me to constitute part of the side effects of modernisation and, in some cases, of exploitation. More significantly, the young and the not so young stand as a monument to the unfinished revolution which can sweep individual countries and continents into extremely turbulent waters, precipitating internal strikes, dissension and dislocation, while we concern ourselves with wars and rumours of wars.

Mr Chairman, participants of this Seminar will have to face these and other issues squarely and honestly. They will have to come up not only with analytical and scholarly statements and a report that makes good reading; they will also have to produce practical and politically feasible action.

It has been said that while young men see visions, old men dream dreams. In my view, both visions and dreams carry a connotation of unreality, but we must endeavour to harness the visions and the dreams if we are to create a future of hope and achievement. It is my belief that the discussions on which we will engage over the next week will play a not inconsiderable part in sketching the views whereby young people, acting within and through their societies, may help to bring us closer to such a future and to put it within our reach.