



Message from
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Secretary General of
the Commonwealth

A CHOGM in the Commonwealth's Diamond anniversary year is a cause for celebration, reflection – and above all action.

Sixty years ago, the Commonwealth of old was born anew, in 'free and equal association'. With the London Declaration of April 1949, the eight founding member countries created what was, in my view, the first real international community: it was a voluntary association, with no fixed articles, and no fixed mandate; it willed itself into being as a community of diverse peoples joining in discussing shared values, goals, and challenges. Sixty years later, the membership numbers 53: a quarter of the world's countries, and a third of its population. The original act of mutual trust has been resoundingly vindicated.

The Commonwealth can be hard to tie down. It is for governments and peoples, for large and small, rich and poor. Its works are in promoting democracy as much as in promoting development. As we have looked back this year, I have found myself charting six decades of evolution by looking at four essential features of the Commonwealth.

First, the Commonwealth of values – trying to live by the principles set down in successive Declarations, strengthening democratic institutions, promoting human rights and enlightened governance, deploying Special Envoys in tense political situations, supporting credible elections and – through the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) – dealing with persistent violations of our most treasured principles and values.

Second, the Commonwealth of its times,

charged with moving with the challenges before it. Those challenges have changed out of all recognition from the formative years of the earliest decades. The challenges of decolonisation and apartheid have given way to those of development, debt, climate, small states, fractured societies. The Commonwealth never could, and never will be able to, stand still.

Third, the Commonwealth that tends to its vulnerable, and first and foremost the 32 of its 53 members with less than 1.5 million people: its small states, faced with unique threats and vulnerabilities, but blessed with unique strengths and resilience. As with vulnerable nations, so with vulnerable people: the Commonwealth has been equally pioneering in its principles and programmes to promote women, the best barometers of the health of any society, and young people, the inheritors of the 21st Century and the Commonwealth.

Fourth, the Commonwealth of Partnership has always been inclusive, and always looking to benefit not just its own citizens but also those of the wider world. Hence its own growth in numbers, as well as the growth of the network of nearly 100 Commonwealth civil society organisations worldwide. We seek to globalise wisdom: the partnerships have gone deeper and wider, with regional and international bodies.

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2009 has been a year of severe economic downturn, in which more than half of the Commonwealth's members will record stagnating or even negative growth. For

all countries, we have seen a sharp need for liquidity; for small and developing countries, as well as 'middle income countries', this translates to an existential need for the wherewithal of survival. We emerge from a year in which the financial crisis, compounded by a food and a fuel crisis, has shaken the foundations of so many of our efforts to solve the deeper and longer-term crises of poverty, disease, insecurity, and now – especially – climate change.

What can CHOGM itself yield in the face of such a catalogue of crises? Above and beyond its vital function in facilitating debate between members, what can it deliver?

Within a huge agenda, and a communiqué which speaks to the widest possible gamut of Commonwealth concern and activity, I am especially hopeful for at least three big advances from CHOGM.

First, on democratic governance. In an Anniversary year, we can restate our core beliefs as an organisation of values, re-committing to the twin pillars of democracy and development. At the practical level, we will be discussing a proposed network of election management bodies across the Commonwealth, as well as a strengthened role for engaging in situations of challenge to our principles and values.

Second, on the environment. Ours will be the last summit before the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen. It is a chance for 53 countries to speak as one, in reinforcing the shared environmental responsibilities of all countries. We can continue to push for improved international environmental governance, which would give greater voice for states facing an existential threat. We can also commit to developing

practical Commonwealth help for our own member countries, especially in helping small and vulnerable countries to access the financial and technical assistance they need.

Third, on young people – who constitute over half of our population, and whose potential will come up against all the obstacles to opportunity presented by the 21st Century. For 35 years, we in the Commonwealth have been pioneers in youth training and mentoring; in building the capacity of youth bodies and youth workers; and in building governments' capacity to support young people. We can set out to do more, with instruction from Port of Spain. For governments themselves, we can support them in making youth a plank of policy and budget across all ministries. And for young people themselves, we can enhance our current Youth Credit Initiative, with a more comprehensive approach to skills development, funding and mentoring for young entrepreneurs, with the involvement of a much wider range of partners – from governments, to banks, to international bodies, and businesses themselves.

This is the business of CHOGM 2009. It is the business not just of Commonwealth Heads of Government, but of Commonwealth business people, civil society people, and young people, who meet at the same time. This is the Commonwealth of governments and of peoples, in constant reinvention. The speed at which the world is turning demands nothing less. E



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