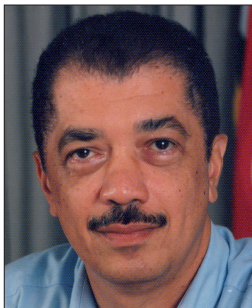


Partnership begins at home

By HE JAMES ALIX MICHEL

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SEYCHELLES



JAMES ALIX MICHEL was appointed President of the Seychelles in April 2004 and elected in July 2006. He was Vice-President from 1996-2004. Mr Michel initially trained to become a teacher, and later worked in the telecommunications sector. He took up his first ministerial office in 1977 and has held several portfolios, among them tourism, education, finance, defence and communication. Aside from introducing economic reforms, he is credited with extending educational opportunities, as well as promoting the development of a modern telecommunications system in the Seychelles.

Partnering is one of mankind's core undertakings in the search for shared benefits, and has enabled us to include a wide range of people and organisations in the construction of a better life. In these turbulent times, the world's leaders have not responded by retreating within their own borders, or by trying to weather the storm through inaction and isolation. Instead, partnerships are allowing us to work together to find solutions. Partnership is the understanding that the economic growth of my neighbour is linked to lasting development in my country.

Seychelles is built upon partnerships. Our vibrant, harmonious and tolerant society is a blend of African, Asian and European influences, forming a unique Seychellois society. Equal opportunities for all are the foundation of our government's policies, and have provided us with the basis for a more equitable society. Today partnerships are helping us to progress further as the government, civil society, and the private sector collaborate to promote sustainable development and to build a resilient economy for Seychelles.

Over the past ten years, the Commonwealth has assisted us in a Review of External Debt Portfolio and Developing Debt Strategy and Policy, providing technical support and training in key areas of our economy. It has played a leading role in ensuring that our elections have met the highest international standards of transparency and impartiality. Of particular benefit to our small country has been the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC). CFTC advisers on coastal management have helped us defend our vulnerable shoreline, while evaluation of our schools has bolstered our curriculum and enhanced our teachers' performance. At the same time, occupational therapists have helped our citizens with disabilities acquire productive skills and find meaningful employment. All of these benefits, and the many others associated with the CFTC, have brought immense benefits to Seychelles as a country and to the lives of individual Seychellois.

Due to our heavy dependence on tourism and fisheries, Seychelles prioritises care of the environment. More than 40 per cent of our land is protected by special legislation. CFTC assistance has helped us raise our environmental awareness and standards even further and to ensure the sustainability of our islands' eco-system for the next generation of Seychellois.

This year Seychelles and Mauritius made a joint

submission to the United Nations on the limits of the continental shelf. This is the first such initiative to be developed collaboratively by two small island states, and I am happy that our Commonwealth played a significant part in this partnership. When Seychelles and Mauritius were preparing their joint submission the two countries received the support of experts from the Economic and Legal Section (ELS) of the Secretariat's Special Advisory Services Division. The submission allows our two countries to equitably share the resources found in the waters and seabed that separates us. Partnering between Seychelles, Mauritius and the Commonwealth for access to additional seabed areas and the resources within has been hailed by the organisation as 'ground-breaking'. The Commonwealth has also assisted us with the drafting of petroleum exploitation agreements.

One area of great concern to Seychelles is the plight of the world's small island developing states (SIDS) in the face of climate change. At forums we have shared the common concerns that threaten our unique island ways of life with our partners from Mauritius, Cape Verde, Vanuatu and Malta. Small islands nations suffer disproportionately from the vagaries of the global economy when shipping routes are changed or tourists stay at home. We lack the resources to cope with the changes. In a pilot project last year Seychelles and Malta assessed the economic vulnerabilities of small states. The findings will be disseminated among other SIDS for the benefit of island communities.

The global economic crisis has not spared Seychelles. Remote as we may be, this financial storm has hit our economy hard. At the end of last year we launched a reform programme to eliminate imbalances in our economy. Partnerships between government, the private sector, and civil society are facilitating the implementation of the programme. The international community, including the Commonwealth, has also provided support.

As we look for bold and innovative solutions at this time of uncertainty, Seychelles is happy that partnership has been chosen as the theme for CHOGM 2009. Our Commonwealth is a leader in the building of partnerships. It draws strength from the diversity of its membership. We see what is best in each of us; we share these values, each one making a unique contribution to the advancement of all. This creative partnership has contributed immensely to progress, peace, greater understanding and solidarity. **F**