

Why the Commonwealth matters

By HE JAKAYA MRISHO KIKWETE

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JAKAYA MRISHO KIKWETE

has been President of Tanzania since December 2005, having previously served as Minister of Water, Energy and Minerals, of Finance and of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. He was also elected as Chairman of the African Union in 2008 and played a significant role in resolving the political crisis in Kenya that year. Under him the Tanzanian economy has performed strongly. He was re-elected in 2010 for a final five year term.

Once again, the great people of Australia will play host to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting from 28th to 30th October, 2011 in the beautiful city of Perth. The Commonwealth is a dynamic organization though diverse and dispersive in terms of geography, levels of development of its members and the different cultures of its people. But, it is our shared values, shared history and shared sense of purpose in the service of our people which has brought us together and enabled our organization to be resilient, survive the test of time and grow stronger.

This meeting, like all the others before it, is another opportunity to renew and reaffirm our commitment to the ideals and advancement of our 62 year old organization. Also, it is an opportunity to discuss, review and renew our shared responsibility to the world.

The Commonwealth is the formidable organization, it is today, because of this collective commitment and its broader outlook on the world. Tanzania is proud to have been a part of this commitment as we celebrate 50 years of our independence and, of our membership of this organization. We promise to continue to be faithful and proactive members of the Commonwealth now and in future.

At this year's CHOGM, like other meetings before it, we will discuss Commonwealth-specific issues and global issues of common interest. I believe, the outcome of our discussions will benefit Commonwealth member states as well as other nations, international organizations and all peoples on this planet.

I am glad that the decisions we took at the Port of Spain CHOGM in 2009 on non-communicable diseases, for example, have been a useful feed into the work of the High Level Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on Non-Communicable Diseases in New York in September 2011. The good work we did on climate change and the historic Climate Change Consensus we came up with at the last CHOGM was not as successful at the Copenhagen Summit. However, it should inform all Commonwealth members and remain the basis of our participation at the COP 17 Summit in Durban, South Africa in November 2011.

May I use this opportunity to appeal to all of us in the Commonwealth to ensure that the Durban meeting succeeds and, that what eluded us in Copenhagen is realized. There is no time to waste. Climate change is

real and its effects are being felt by all of us although at different levels of intensity and spread. No people or nation, however powerful, is immune and can on its own succeed in overcoming the effects of climate change.

For us in Tanzania, the perils of climate change are very much being felt. Weather patterns have completely changed, rainfall has become less reliable and drought spells more frequent and last longer than in the past. As a result, there is serious water and food stress affecting many people in many areas of the country these days. The snows of Mount Kilimanjaro are melting fast, there are fewer glaciers left indicating that in the next few decades, there may be no snow left on this magnificent roof of Africa, unless dramatic reversals occur in global warming and rainfall trends.

Along our Indian Ocean coastline, the sea level has been rising, submerging lands and putting several places in danger of inundation, like the town of Pangani is at the moment. The Maziwe Island, nearby, is already completely submerged causing green turtles to lose their age-old habitat for laying eggs. The highlands of Tanzania which used to be malaria-free now have the disease because, temperatures have become warmer enough for malaria-infecting mosquitoes to survive.

We cannot wait to see agreement being reached at COP 17 in Durban, so that we can all begin to implement measures that will reduce carbon emissions, reverse global warming and spare the global environment and our planet from total destruction.

With regard to the agenda of this CHOGM and others in future, I am hoping that poverty eradication, food security and other development challenges facing developing countries in the Commonwealth will always occupy a prominent place. We have been doing so in the case of small island states and landlocked countries and I believe poor developing nations deserve similar treatment. Of course, global security, good governance, rule of law and human rights are equally important. Fortunately, they already dominate the agenda of CHOGMs, so it is high time other important matters are given equal attention. Among the urgent matters that I suggest should be afforded special attention is youth development, in particular the critical problem of unemployment.

I am not suggesting anything completely out of the ordinary, after all our organization is meant for matters like these. During her address to the 1997 CHOGM in

Edinburgh, Scotland, the head of the Commonwealth, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the inspiration and guide to the Commonwealth, had this to say about our organization. "The more the activities of the Commonwealth bring direct benefits to its people, the stronger the organization will be."

Her Majesty's statement underscores putting people first and people-oriented activities at the top of the Commonwealth agenda. This is very much in line with the guiding principles and ideals of the Commonwealth. Giving attention to our young men and women is even more critical.

I am told there are nearly two billion young people under the age of 25 years throughout the Commonwealth. They are an integral part of the Commonwealth, so this organisation has to relate to them and serve their interests. They need proper care so that they can grow to full adulthood, afford a decent life and become useful citizens. All nations and societies must ensure good nutrition, health-care and proper education to their young people during their formative years. More importantly, they need to ensure that they get decent employment so as to enable them assume their historic responsibilities in society. Failure to do this to our youth is not only loss of the all important human capital, but a possible source of instability in our nations.

I know, this is a problem which all nations contend with, rich and poor. However, to the poorer nations, the challenge is even greater because of the fragility of their economies and weak resource base. I believe, through collective endeavours, under the auspices of the Commonwealth, these nations can be assisted to overcome some of their weaknesses and enable their youths to assume and play their rightful roles as responsible citizens.

We need, therefore, to come together and work together - rich and poor, big and small - on this historic mission. It is incumbent upon the Commonwealth and the richer nations to help the poorer ones make a difference. This, indeed, is the promise of the Commonwealth yesterday, today and tomorrow. This, indeed, gives befitting credence to the theme of this CHOGM of "Building National Resilience, Building Global Resilience." Let us all rise to the occasion.

It would be remiss of me if I did not mention and underscore the revitalization of our organization. It is heartwarming, indeed, to note that the Eminent Persons Group has concluded its work and has put forward pertinent recommendations for the Summit to digest and decide on the way forward. I am of the view that, we have a good basis, now, to revitalise the Commonwealth and make it a better, efficient, responsive and effective organisation.

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