

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 54 countries that support each other and work together towards shared goals in democracy and development.

The world's largest and smallest, richest and poorest countries make up the Commonwealth and are home to two billion citizens of all faiths and ethnicities – over half of whom are 25 or under. Member countries span six continents and oceans from Africa (19) to Asia (8), the Americas (3), the Caribbean (10), Europe (3) and the South Pacific (11).

The Commonwealth, with roots as far back as the 1870s, believes that the best democracies are achieved through partnerships – of governments, business, and civil society. This unique association was reconstituted in 1949 when Commonwealth Prime Ministers met and adopted what has become known as the 'London Declaration' where it was agreed all member countries would be "freely and equally associated."

Since then membership has continued to grow. The most recent members are Rwanda - which was admitted at the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Cameroon and Mozambique, which was the first country to join with no historical or administrative association with another Commonwealth country.

Beyond the ties of history, language and institutions, it is the association's values which unite its members: democracy, freedom, peace, the rule of law and opportunity for all. These values were agreed and set down by all Commonwealth Heads of Government at two of their biennial meetings (known as CHOGMs) in Singapore in 1971 and reaffirmed twenty years later in Harare.

At government level, the values are protected by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), a rotating group of nine Foreign Ministers, which assesses the nature of any infringement and recommends measures for collective action from member countries. It has the authority to suspend or even recommend to Heads of Government that a member country be expelled. When member countries have been suspended the Commonwealth continues to do everything possible to bring them back into the fold. While CMAG represents one aspect of the Commonwealth's commitment to democratic principles, many more discreet interventions are made through 'good offices' work, where specially appointed representatives conduct quiet diplomacy as part of efforts to prevent or resolve conflicts and build dialogue and democratic structures.

As well as Heads of Government, ministers responsible for education, environment, civil society, finance, foreign affairs, gender affairs, health law, tourism and youth also meet regularly. This ensures that Commonwealth policies and programmes represent views of the members and gives governments a better understanding of each other's goals in an increasingly globalised world.

There are three intergovernmental organisations in the association: the Commonwealth Secretariat (which executes plans agreed by Commonwealth Heads of Government through technical assistance, advice and policy development); the Commonwealth Foundation (which helps civil society organisations promote democracy, development and cultural understanding) and the Commonwealth of Learning (which encourages the development and sharing of open learning and distance education). Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is Head of the Commonwealth and Kamallesh Sharma, current Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, is the principal global advocate for the Commonwealth and Chief Executive of the Secretariat.

Citizen-to-citizen links are as important to the Commonwealth as the contacts between member governments. The Commonwealth's worldwide network of around 90 professional and advocacy organisations, most of which bear its name, continues to grow with a third of these based outside the UK. They work at local, national, regional or international levels and play crucial roles in policy, political or social aspects of Commonwealth life. One such organisation is the Commonwealth Games Federation, which manages the four-yearly multi-sport event.

Commonwealth countries work together in a spirit of co-operation, partnership and understanding. This openness and flexibility are integral to the Commonwealth's effectiveness. Emphasis on equality has helped it play leading roles in decolonisation, combating racism and advancing sustainable development in poor countries.

This support network of countries and organisations is involved in a diverse range of work, from helping trade negotiations, building the small business sector and encouraging women entrepreneurs to supporting the quality and quantity of teachers, and increasing understanding of HIV/AIDS.

As well as working with each other, member countries and organisations have also built alliances outside the Commonwealth. Commonwealth ideas have been taken up by the World Bank on Small States, by the World Health Organization on the migration of doctors and nurses, by the International Labour Organization on the migration of teachers. Its support and expertise have been enlisted by the European Union (EU) and the African Union on building governance in Africa, and by the EU and the Pacific Islands Forum on building governance in the Pacific.

The Commonwealth is part of the world that it serves, sharing the same interests as those of its citizens: democratic freedom and economic and social development. **F**