

Giving a voice to the voiceless

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SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH



KAMALESH SHARMA was educated at Modern School and St Stephen's College, Delhi, and at King's College, Cambridge, where he read literature. Mr Sharma has been a member of the Indian Foreign Service since 1965 and has served at ambassadorial level in five missions. In his career as a diplomat he was heavily involved in multilateral issues and served as India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva from 1988-90. Prior to his appointment as Commonwealth Secretary-General on 1st April 2008, he was India's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, where he was closely involved in Commonwealth activities.

Since the G20 first started as a gathering of Heads of Government, the Commonwealth has been active, encouraging these leaders to think beyond national concerns to the needs of those not present at their G20 table. The relationship between the Commonwealth and the G20 has since gone from strength to strength: we help give voice to the concerns of the voiceless at the highest political levels, and we back that up with high quality and innovative research and analysis. The five Commonwealth members of the G20 have worked closely to build the Commonwealth's advocacy, relevance and practical engagement with the G20.

Over many years the Commonwealth has given its perspectives on global economic, financial, social and environmental developments and policy. There have been significant collective Commonwealth actions to identify and raise focus and interest in several global issues. These include climate change; multilateral debt; migration of skills; small states' unique disadvantages; the vulnerability, and resilience and growth challenges of small states; aid effectiveness; poverty reduction; transforming economies and achieving sustainable development.

Since 2009, Commonwealth Heads of Government and Finance Ministers meetings have all highlighted the potential for the Commonwealth to play an important role as a forum through which members and non-members of the G20 can work together on global economic policy issues.

Canadian Prime Minister Harper took the significant step of starting a dialogue between himself, as the 2010 G20 Chair, with the Secretaries-General of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie. Our two organisations represent a preponderance of the world's smallest developing states, including the most vulnerable states.

This initiative – coupled with the decision taken at the G20 Toronto Summit to establish the G20 Development Working Group, with the goal of formulating a dedicated, multi-year G20 focus and mechanism to address global development issues – has proved to be decisive in strengthening the Commonwealth-G20 relationship.

Consultations followed with the Korean G20 Chair, and the two Secretaries-General then met

with French President Sarkozy, as Chair of the G20 in 2011. In May this year, the practice continued through consultations with President Calderon in Mexico City as Chair of the G20.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2011, Australia proposed and Heads agreed to start an annual Commonwealth Dialogue on the G20 Development Agenda. The Heads also agreed to continue to urge the G20 to address current economic instability and to take concrete steps to put open trade, jobs, social protection and economic development at the heart of the recovery.

After Mexico assumed the G20 Presidency for 2012, early in January, clearly indicating the extent to which Commonwealth-G20 relations have developed, as a pioneering step the first informal meeting of the G20 Development Working Group was held at the Commonwealth's London Headquarters. The presence at that meeting of all G20 members further reinforced the Commonwealth Secretariat's role as an important partner in the Group's work.

Through our political level and technical level engagement, we have added profile and relevance to the G20's deliberations on key challenges – from debt to trade to climate change to sustainable development and economic resilience.

This year key among Mexico's priorities is the nexus between Green Growth for poverty eradication and sustainable development. We have sought to contribute to the thinking of the Chair on the challenges and dilemmas before poor and vulnerable states.

The Commonwealth-G20 relationship will grow further and deepen, building upon a unique set of Commonwealth advantages, promoting the wider impact of the Commonwealth within the G20 and beyond, and advancing the interests of developing countries, particularly the small and the vulnerable. The remit is likely to grow with the contribution the Commonwealth and La Francophonie are able to make to the policy work of the G20.

Although the relationship commenced only four years ago, there is already valuable evidence of impact. The Commonwealth, through both its five G20 members and its forty-nine non-G20 members, is well placed to be a durable partner. F