

Two Billion Voices

Shaping the Future
of the Commonwealth



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

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Foreword by Foreign Secretary David Miliband



The Commonwealth is a unique and important organisation whose two billion citizens cut across many of the divisions which threaten to destabilise the world today – between rich and poor; powerful and vulnerable; Christian, Hindu and Muslim. Yet the power of the Commonwealth lies in the values shared by members despite these differences: democracy, freedom, peace, the rule of law and opportunity for all.

This transcendence of political, economic and social barriers in the name of our values provides the Commonwealth with an ideological grounding that goes far beyond its colonial roots. The challenges we face in today's increasingly interdependent world show that the Commonwealth is, if anything, more important and more relevant to the world in the 21st Century than when it was founded 60 years ago.

This is why I am delighted to be working with the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) to launch a 'Commonwealth Conversation', looking at how we can best refresh the

Commonwealth to keep it relevant and effective for the next 60 years and beyond. The RCS will host the conversation and engage as far and wide as possible across member countries – including not only governments but also civil society, opinion leaders, media and other interested stakeholders.



David Miliband
Foreign Secretary
July 2009

The Modern Commonwealth

The modern Commonwealth is unique. Its 53 members span four continents, representing almost a third of the world's population and a fifth of all global trade. Half of the Commonwealth's population of two billion is under the age of 25. These young people will go on to forge the shape of the world in the 21st century.

In its 60 year history, through its ability to take collective action, the modern Commonwealth has achieved a great deal. It has been a strong proponent of democracy, observing elections across its member countries. On development, it has channelled millions of pounds worth of aid to member countries, and funds programmes around the world.

It has also played a significant role in raising the profile of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) programme to reduce debt among the poorest countries. The pressure it placed on South Africa had a real impact in bringing an end to apartheid.

Commonwealth members have shared principles, a common language, and similar legal and political values. It is seen as a place in which to do international business without the complexities of some other international organisations. It is a forum where members can conduct peer appraisal in relative comfort, but where censure can encourage change. These attributes represent some of the Commonwealth's greatest strengths.

In addition to the Commonwealth Secretariat and other core organisations in the Commonwealth 'family', we recognise the valuable contribution of the Commonwealth Associations – a network of societies,

institutions, associations, organisations, funds and charities which support the Commonwealth's aims. The network comprises both intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations which facilitate links across the different nations, cultures, races and levels of economic development within the Commonwealth.

In future, we strongly believe that the Commonwealth can continue to play a useful role and deliver across a range of goals around the world.

Like any organisation, however, it needs to stay relevant and effective, and the purpose of this document is to pose some of the key questions we think should be discussed and suggest our early thinking on each of these.

The UK is the single largest contributor to the Commonwealth; during 2007/08, UK government contributions to the Commonwealth amounted to £35 million.

Despite this, we believe in building consensus and recognise that successfully strengthening the Commonwealth can only be achieved through collaboration. This is why we are launching a 'Commonwealth Conversation', owned and independently managed by the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS), to stimulate debate on the future of the Commonwealth and help to make it as useful and effective as possible for the 21st Century. Headquartered in London but with branches and affiliated societies across the Commonwealth, the RCS is one of the oldest and largest civil society organisations devoted to the Commonwealth.



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Question one: What are the key challenges?

We think today's Commonwealth faces two significant challenges.

First, its brand is weak across large parts of the membership. A recent RCS survey in the UK suggests it resonates well with older generations, but the only exposure many young people have is through the Commonwealth Games. Few are fully aware of the Commonwealth's significant contribution on global issues.

To gain a broader view of this issue, the RCS is conducting similar surveys in other geographies, as the Commonwealth must be recognised and supported by its citizens to stay relevant in the 21st Century.

A second challenge is around the Commonwealth spreading itself too thin; the Commonwealth has tried to take on more and more of the world's challenges rather than focussing on its core strengths. From the G20 to the African Union, there

are now more multilateral forums than ever before. This increase is a positive indicator that more countries recognise their interdependence, and recognise that the issues they face are best dealt with together.

Responding effectively to challenges such as development, climate change, terrorism, nuclear proliferation and the global economic crisis requires the world to come together and take collective, coordinated action.

At the same time, however, an increase in the number of multilateral organisations increases the risk of overlap in some areas, diluting impact and adding confusion.

All institutions need to stay attuned to the changing multilateral landscape to build on their core strengths, but also to recognise that there are some areas best dealt with by others; not every organisation can solve every challenge. The second question we would therefore like to pose is: **What are the Commonwealth's current strengths?**

Question two: What are the Commonwealth's current strengths?

The Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2008/9 – 2011/12 sets out the focus, objectives and expected results of the organisation between 2008 and 2012. The plan has two ongoing and interlinked goals reflecting the Commonwealth's emphasis on the promotion of democracy and development across eight strategic areas.

The first goal, to promote **peace and democracy**, clearly supports the Commonwealth's fundamental values. This work is carried out through the following programmes:

- > **Good offices for peace:** Focusing on preventing and resolving conflict, recent activities have included strengthening democratic processes and institutions in the Gambia, Cameroon and the Maldives.
- > **Democracy and consensus building:** Commonwealth Election Observer Teams have recently attended elections in Swaziland, Ghana, Bangladesh, and Malawi. Their conclusions are a useful independent source of information for members.
- > **Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG):** A forum established to deal with serious or persistent violations of the Commonwealth's fundamental political values. Again, conclusions are respected and drive member states to act.
- > **Promoting rule of law:** Many members have successfully embarked on judicial and constitutional reform through Commonwealth programmes. More recently work on money laundering and counter-terrorism has been included in this, but a question remains about whether this should be within the Commonwealth's remit in the long term.

- > **Human rights:** Helping members to adopt major international human rights instruments, including UN Human Rights standards.

Similarly, the second strategic goal – to achieve **Pro-Poor Growth and Sustainable Development** – demonstrably supports the core principles through:

- > **Public sector development:** Improving public institutions, strengthening public service training and helping to develop ICT strategies and knowledge management.
- > **Economic development:** Currently, the focus of this is advice on international trade, but could more be done to revive the Doha Development Round (DDR)?
- > **Environmentally sustainable Development:** With a young population, and many members who will be particularly impacted by climate change, the Commonwealth already speaks with a powerful and respected voice on climate change.
- > **Human Development:** Particularly active on education, gender and health, the Commonwealth work in this area links well to initiatives by the UN, WHO, ILO, and bilateral donor programmes.

Returning to the risk of spreading itself too thin, we would like to ask whether the Commonwealth's strategy could be refined further. The first goal (Peace and Democracy) is where we think the Commonwealth adds most value. The second goal (pro-poor growth and sustainable development), although noble in aspiration, is more complicated – many other bilateral and multilateral donors with more resources are focussed on delivering in this area.

Climate change (particularly helping smaller states) and economic development (for example

financial institutional reform and trade issues) are notable exceptions to this, where we think the Commonwealth does have the potential to move the agenda forward directly.

But is there scope for at least merging some of the priority areas under the second goal?

Though the focus of this paper is the Commonwealth Secretariat, there are two other key Commonwealth organisations that we think merit particular discussion: the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Business Council. Both broadly align their work to the Secretariat's strategy.

The Foundation works to enhance the role of **civil society organisations**. Its core programmes support the work of the secretariat by focussing on governance and democracy; human development; cultural understanding and respect; and communities and livelihoods. Again, there may be a question over whether the Foundation is trying to take on too much and consequently diluting its impact.

The Commonwealth is good for **business** too. Through the Commonwealth Business Council, it presents real opportunities for members to keep trading and keep growing: over the past ten years, intra-Commonwealth trade has expanded from \$2 trillion to \$3 trillion per year, and investment flows have reached over \$160 billion.

However, while Commonwealth trade and investment now accounts for over 20% of the world total, since the onset of the current global economic crisis, Commonwealth trade has decreased by 9%.



Figure 1: Commonwealth members in other international organisations



Question three: What should the Commonwealth do in the future?

First and foremost, we believe that the Commonwealth should focus on its core strengths as outlined above, with a particular focus on **human rights, democracy and good governance**.

We would emphasise the real value we see in the ability of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group to deal with **violations of the democratic values and principles** of the Commonwealth, and we would be interested in discussing the potential for developing this in future. For example, the group could meet more frequently at non-Ministerial level, expanding its remit to work with countries likely to infringe the Harare principles and acting as an advisory panel for the Secretary-General.

In addition to the work to support its core values, however, the make up of the Commonwealth offers opportunities in some other areas. The diagram on page 10 shows Commonwealth membership of other international institutions in detail. With four G8 + 5 members, a cross-section of G20 members and a host of G77 members, the Commonwealth is well placed to lead discussion on the **reform of other institutions** as well as working to strengthen and develop its own work.

Similarly, with a young population and many members who will be disproportionately affected by **climate change** (such as Bangladesh and many island states), a united Commonwealth voice on climate change is a powerful force.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November 2009, we hope that Commonwealth leaders will agree to push for an ambitious post-2012 agreement at the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen in December.

We also see significant value in the Commonwealth's ongoing role as an honest broker between **small states** and large states. The New York Small States office has proved successful and popular, and discussions are underway to open a similar office in Geneva. We would welcome debate over whether the Commonwealth could be doing even more in this area, for example by seeking common ground on issues such as climate change and trade negotiations, or by developing closer links with the Pacific Islands Forum.

Beyond core values and opportunities created by the unique membership, there are two other areas we think the Commonwealth should continue to focus on, because of the vital role it plays at present.

The first of these is **peacekeeping**; countries of the Commonwealth currently provide over half of the world's peacekeepers. We would like this to continue and develop in the future. Could we use Commonwealth expertise and resources to train and mentor peacekeepers, for example?

This is an area where many other organisations are also heavily involved, however, so we need to ensure that all initiatives are complementary of other efforts to date.

Second, we recognise the excellent work on **Education**, particularly in supporting students from developing countries through **Commonwealth Scholarships** and in providing **English language training** as an economic development tool. English language is a huge advantage for accessing the global knowledge pool and economy. There may be scope for developing or extending joint programmes with the British Council, DFID or Commonwealth organisations and again this is an area where we would welcome more discussion.



Question four: How can the Commonwealth be more effective?

First, we need a Commonwealth which is more **valued by and relevant to its citizens**. Despite the excellent work delivered and funded by a range of Commonwealth organisations, the RCS poll in March this year showed that few people fully appreciate the role of the Commonwealth in the 21st Century in the UK, or are aware of its past successes. Similar polls being conducted by the RCS in six other countries will demonstrate to what extent this issue applies across the Commonwealth.

A key driver of our support for the RCS' 'Commonwealth Conversation' is to involve opinion leaders and wider publics in the discussion over a refreshed and strengthened Commonwealth, so that we build in the principles of participation, engagement and awareness-raising as early as possible.

Second, to develop our initial thinking on the core strengths above, we would also like to better understand the effectiveness of some Commonwealth programmes to ensure that all members are achieving best **value for money**.

To this end, we would like to see the Commonwealth adopt an industry-leading set of performance indicators so that we can make

clear and informed decisions on the future of each programme.

Third, we would like to see **Commonwealth membership extended** to countries who share our values and principles. We actively support the Rwandan bid to join the Commonwealth – membership would bind Rwanda into the values and principles of the Commonwealth; provide an opportunity to start addressing issues such as press freedom and political space for opposition; and draw on the wide range of Commonwealth experience in dealing with difficult inter-ethnic issues.

While Rwanda's bid is the only one currently in progress, we are aware of early interest being shown by several other countries.

Finally, the Secretariat needs to **continue to modernise**, by fully developing results based delivery, management, and budgeting. Programmes to introduce these are underway. The Secretariat needs to be a delivery organisation which focuses only on those issues where the Commonwealth can demonstrate clear added value, because the Commonwealth must not be seen as a 'one stop global issues shop' – its work should complement, rather than duplicate or distract from, work done through other organisations.

Question five: How do we get there?

As a first step, we are supporting the Commonwealth Conversation, to be led independently by the Royal Commonwealth Society with the support of the Secretariat.

We would like this to be as inclusive and open a debate as possible, and are therefore seeking input not just from the 53 member governments but also from the 90 organisations that make up the Commonwealth 'family', and from interested stakeholders and publics in Commonwealth countries around the world. The RCS will design the approach to information collection and establish the discussion forums, making heavy use of digital media to ensure that people are able to contribute usefully from across the world.

We are keen to ensure that the Commonwealth Conversation is time-bound and constructive, so will be aiming for initial results in time for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November. We hope this will enable us to agree a series of pragmatic and tangible steps forward to shape the future of the Commonwealth in 2010.

The modern Commonwealth needs to extend what is common between us and what unifies us. It must also create greater wealth for all its members, both economic and social. In a united leadership, the United Kingdom will play its part in achieving this through consultation, dialogue and coordinated action.



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