

Commonwealth Dialogue on Climate Change

Remarks by Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC Secretary-General of the Commonwealth of Nations

6 April 2016

Your Excellency Mary Robinson, Sir David King, Excellencies, distinguished guests, Commonwealth friends,

It really is a pleasure for me, so early in my tenure as Secretary-General, to welcome all of you to Marlborough House, and to thank you for being here to contribute to this Commonwealth Dialogue on Climate Change.

Today is the first in a series of dialogues on major global issues affecting our member states that we will convene here at Marlborough House.

As I take up the responsibility entrusted to me by Heads of Government, I am determined that the Commonwealth collectively has a central role to play both on policy and advocacy to serve our member states on concerns that pose an existential threat to so many, and directly affect us all.

I feel incredibly lucky to have been born on one of the smallest islands in our 53 countries, in the Commonwealth of Dominica. There are only 72,000 people in Dominica, so I represent a large percentage of my country's population.

I understand what it's like to come from a small island. I understand the existential threat that is presented by climate change. For us, it has been our lived experience for decades as the rest of the world has been in denial.

I have seen first-hand the impact of changing weather patterns. When Tropical Storm Erika hit Dominica last August it affected 90% of Dominica's GDP and caused more than US\$500m worth of damage.

I marked my first day in office as Secretary-General last Friday by formally commissioning the rehabilitation of the old library building in Roseau right on the seafront to be the home of the new Dominica Disaster Resource Centre, a project approved by the Government of Dominica following the devastation caused by Erika. It was my last act as the Dominican International Disaster Relief Co-ordinator and proudly my first act as your Secretary-General.

The Disaster Resource Centre will serve as a hub for information and support on disaster awareness, reconstruction and resettlement for the public as well as experts, volunteers and NGOs. It will also serve as an information centre so that



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tourists can learn more about the real world impact of climate change. I'd like to acknowledge the support that was given for that work by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office amongst others.

Many of you will recall or have painful personal experience of other extreme weather events - in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

The devastation that Hurricane Ivan unleashed on Grenada twelve years ago caused about US\$1bn of damage, the equivalent of two years' GDP.

A year ago we saw the impact of Cyclone Pam in the Pacific, and the catastrophe it caused in Vanuatu where a generation of development was lost in a matter of hours, and where 70% of its population was displaced.

More recently, we witnessed the calamity created by Cyclone Winston on Fiji in February of this year which caused damage estimated at US\$460m.

It is good to have the High Commissioner of Fiji with us today, and his first-hand knowledge of how the cyclone affected his country and the region will be a most valuable contribution.

Climate change is the most severe global challenge facing our generation. It is multifaceted and has an impact on all levels of society, but particularly among the poorer and more vulnerable.

As the pace and magnitude of the threat continues to grow it puts at risk the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of our member states and citizens.

We must therefore act decisively as a Commonwealth - and as your Secretary-General I mean to make such action a priority.

We have to maintain the consensus and momentum generated at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta last November when, on the very eve of the Paris summit, our leaders acknowledged the urgency and heightened risk of the global threat confronting us.

This is not a new argument for the Commonwealth.

Indeed the Commonwealth has been calling for collective action on this topic since 1989, when it adopted the Langkawi declaration on the environment, and then in 1994 from the first Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island States came the *Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS*, long before Kyoto was even on the horizon.



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In the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009, the *Port of Spain Climate Change Consensus: The Commonwealth Climate Change Declaration* had a decisive impact on the eve of COP15 in Copenhagen.

This time, in advance of COP 21, CARICOM in July last year with the focus on a target of limiting global rises in temperature to 1.5 degrees; and then in Papua New Guinea the Pacific Island Forum also agreed they made a commitment to work together at Paris to try and deliver 1.5.

Then those 24 countries joined with the remainder of the Commonwealth when we went to Malta for the Heads of Government Meeting immediately before Paris. There was an agreement that 53 of us would commit to 2% with 52 of us saying 1.5% would be our aspiration. Countries like Canada that had been sceptical in the past came on board because they heard the voice of the small island states in the Commonwealth.

The 53 countries then went to Paris, united in our aims and active across the five different regions. We had members of the Commonwealth with one voice saying, “take this seriously.” And they did.

So now, having been instrumental in achieving the Paris agreement, the Commonwealth now has to be instrumental in delivering it.

The agreement brings hope for a more united global approach, and although not all states were fully satisfied with the outcome, it is a major step forward.

These important interventions show the Commonwealth and Commonwealth countries being instrumental in bringing together our many small and vulnerable member states and uniting their voices in advocacy for action with those whose economies are larger and voice on the world stage more powerful.

This potent combination is a distinctive Commonwealth strength and advantage, and we will continue to provide smaller and more vulnerable states with a vital platform for wider political consideration of their concerns, not least in Europe by the participation of our three EU members, namely the United Kingdom, Cyprus and Malta. Malta is Commonwealth Chair-in-Office and will soon have the Presidency of the European Union, so is a powerful European voice for the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth’s platform is supported by targeted programmes of research, advocacy and capacity building to achieve greater resilience through sustainable development.

The challenge for all of us here, and across the Commonwealth, is we now need to move from agreement to action. There are a number of questions we need to



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answer, which is why I am starting this dialogue today.

For example, do we need to create a climate toolkit to deliver together on the COP21 agenda? What are the practical steps that ensure we can deliver what is not just an environmental challenge but a health, wealth and development challenge? Can we deliver a more symbiotic solution which is restorative and regenerative?

How do we co-ordinate across the different agencies, departments, countries and entities?

At their Meeting in Malta our Heads of Government approved the establishment of the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub that will help member states - particularly those with constrained capacity - gain access to much needed climate finance.

This very practical initiative is an excellent example of Commonwealth co-operation, and shows how we can together respond to the needs of the large number of small states within our membership, most of which are classified as Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

This will be one of a range of flagship Commonwealth programmes designed to support national efforts and build the resilience of small states and the least developed countries.

It responds well to the need for our member states to move towards low-carbon, climate resilient economies in order to achieve sustainable development, and the challenges they face when seeking to finance such climate action.

We really are incredibly grateful to Mauritius for generously undertaking to host the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, and to both Mauritius and Australia for the financial support they have provided towards this initiative. We hope others will follow their lead, and we look forward to commitments from additional partners.

This initiative is complemented by our established programme to build resilience and address the vulnerabilities of our members, particularly small states.

But how do we better develop a climate impact assessment for policy development, for building regulations for land use? Another question is how we ensure better coordination when disaster does strike. The Commonwealth connection helps build co-operation and capacity, and leverages critical resources to tackle climate change and for recovery and rebuilding following natural disasters.

After Tropical Storm Erika, the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency swung into action, showing not just a solidarity for one another, but a strategic



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capability so often missing around the world.

Here, at the Secretariat, we see ourselves having a vital role in linking regional institutions and partners across the Commonwealth - for example the Caribbean Climate Change Centre in Belize, the South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme, the Indian Ocean Commission, and many other partners. How do we best develop those sort of regional networks?

Another Commonwealth initiative seeks to address the dual challenges of climate change and crippling high debt burdens faced by many of our member states.

Our Multilateral Debt Swap for Climate Action initiative will involve an agreement between participating climate finance providers and debtor countries. It will reduce their public debt in exchange for a commitment to use debt repayments to finance local climate change projects.

The mechanism underpinning our Commonwealth debt swap proposal is simple.

There is a huge pot of climate finance resources available, estimated at US\$331bn, a similarly huge climate finance implementation gap of US\$70bn, and at the same time a persistent and unsustainable debt overhang in climate vulnerable countries.

Our scheme will swap national debt for climate change action, and has already gained considerable support - including the endorsement of the UN Secretary General - but I know we have more to do and more to deliver.

These are the challenges. These are the opportunities.

I look forward to hearing the contributions that each of you will make in order to assist us in making the implementation of COP21 a reality and not just a dream.

Thank you.