

The Aso Rock Commonwealth Declaration

Nigeria, 2003

1. We, the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth of Nations, meeting at Abuja, Nigeria, from 5 to 8 December 2003, commit ourselves to strengthen development and democracy, through partnership for peace and prosperity. Building on the landmark Declarations in Singapore, Harare and Fancourt, we are committed to democracy, good governance, human rights, gender equality and a more equitable sharing of the benefits of globalisation.
2. We recognise that the Governments of the Commonwealth are partners sharing a fundamental responsibility for the development, security and well-being of their people. We acknowledge their central role in guaranteeing stability, good economic management and governance, and in promoting sustainable growth and development.
3. We welcome the Report of the Commonwealth Expert Group on Development and Democracy which was constituted following the 2002 Coozum Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). We have noted its key recommendations for Commonwealth actions, focusing on how democracies can best be supported in combating poverty.
4. We believe that efforts aimed at eradicating poverty and improving governance are essential for greater international equity and global peace and security. We recognise that the Millennium Development Goals have mobilised governments, international institutions and civil society to reduce poverty with renewed vigour and commitment.
5. We recognise that globalisation has significant potential benefits for all. However, the world is characterised by uneven development, and we therefore stress that globalisation must provide real opportunities for developing countries to transform their economies and societies through diversification for the benefit of their people. It is the strategic goal of the Commonwealth to help their pre-industrial members to transition into skilled working- and middle-class societies, recognising that their domestic policies must be conducive to such transitions.

6. We further recognise that while development and democracy are goals each in its own right, they must be mutually reinforcing, with a clear 'democratic dividend', in terms of delivering tangible benefits to people. We are convinced that broad-based prosperity creates the stability conducive to the promotion of democracy; and that strong democratic institutions better promote development.
7. Accordingly, we commit ourselves to make democracy work better for pro-poor development by implementing sustainable development programmes and enhancing democratic institutions and processes in all human endeavours. We recognise that building democracy is a constantly evolving process. It must also be uncomplicated and take into account national circumstances. Among the objectives we seek to promote are the following:
 - i. a participatory democracy characterised by free and fair elections and representative legislatures;
 - ii. an independent judiciary;
 - iii. a well-trained public service;
 - iv. a transparent and accountable public accounts system;
 - v. machinery to protect human rights;
 - vi. the right to information;
 - vii. active participation of civil society, including women and youth;
 - viii. substantially increased and more effective financial resources;
 - ix. adherence to the internationally agreed targets of 0.7 per cent of Gross National Product for development assistance;
 - x. financing and realisation of the Millennium Development Goals; and
 - xi. increased democracy at the global level, including enhanced participation and transparency in international institutions.

Promoting Free and Fair Trade

8. We fully commit ourselves to an effective, equitable, rules-based multilateral trading system, developed under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation, to support pro-poor development and democracy. To this end, we have issued a separate Statement on Multilateral Trade, which is annexed to this Declaration.

Poverty Eradication and the Millennium Development Goals

9. We reiterate our collective commitment and determination to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially in regard to health and education. We welcome the efforts of the Commonwealth to attain the MDGs, in particular for poverty eradication, through technical assistance programmes in developing member countries. We affirm our enthusiasm and resolve to increase aid levels to support the MDGs. We welcome the initiative of the United Kingdom for an International Finance Facility, and call upon other developed countries to consider this and similar options to alleviate poverty in developing countries. We commit ourselves to support appropriate private sector initiatives to promote foreign direct investment and capital flows to developing member countries.

Role of Women

10. We recognise the critical role which women play in development and resolve to ensure that development processes empower women to play that full role.

Action Against Corruption and Recovery of Assets

11. We recognise that corruption erodes economic development and corporate governance. We welcome the successful conclusion of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and urge the early signature, ratification and implementation of the Convention by member states. We pledge maximum co-operation and assistance amongst our governments to recover assets of illicit origin and repatriate them to their countries of origin. This will make more resources available for development purposes. To this end, we request the Secretary-General to establish a Commonwealth Working Group to help advance effective action in this area.

Debt Management

12. We recognise that the debt burden constitutes a major obstacle to allocating resources to key socio-economic sectors in developing member countries. We also acknowledge the need for a deeper, broader and more flexible approach to debt relief and debt cancellation for developing member countries, to achieve long-term debt sustainability and release resources, particularly for health and education. We welcome the advisory and consensus-building work of

the Commonwealth Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Ministerial Forum and encourage its efforts to achieve HIPCs' sustainable exit from debt. We support the provision of additional resources through topping-up at the completion point under HIPC and a more comprehensive approach to address unsustainable debt.

Financing for Development

13. We believe the Commonwealth should lead the international community in ensuring that the official development assistance target is achieved. Recognising that poor member countries urgently need increased resources for pro-poor development, we call on the international community to respond positively through the following measures:
 - i. improve aid effectiveness through reductions in tied aid, increased direct budgetary support and implementation of the Rome Declaration on Harmonisation;
 - ii. support social safety nets to reduce the impact of poverty on the most vulnerable groups and to mitigate the transition costs of reforms designed to enhance the efficiency and competitiveness of economies;
 - iii. strengthen the capacity of the international financial architecture to assist poor countries to address the impact of exogenous shocks such as a sharp deterioration in their terms of trade and natural disasters;
 - iv. encourage the private sector to play a major role in the promotion of trade and investment; and
 - v. encourage greater participation of poor and vulnerable groups in the preparation of poverty reduction strategy papers for the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and wider donor community.

Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC)

14. We note the commendable assistance provided by the CFTC to the development efforts of our member countries and commit ourselves to continued support for the Fund. We agree that the resources available to the Fund should be enhanced and on no account be permitted to decline below their current levels in real terms.

Health

15. We are committed to combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases which remain a threat to sustainable development. We recognise that diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis are not only health problems but are also development issues. The high incidence of such diseases can also reverse the development process. We continue to believe that strong political leadership and education remain crucial components of the multi-sectoral response to combating HIV/AIDS. The threat from HIV/AIDS is especially great in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has two-thirds of the world's 40 million persons living with HIV/AIDS, and in the Caribbean. We call for reforms at the national level to create effective health delivery systems, as well as adequate external support to achieve this. We welcome the recent World Trade Organisation agreement on affordable drugs and call for its interpretation and implementation in a manner that makes appropriate drugs available at low cost to poor countries.

Education

16. We affirm that education, whether formal or informal, is central to development in any society and is of the highest priority to the Commonwealth. In an increasingly divided and insecure world, education must play a crucial role for people, both young and old, for them to optimise their opportunities and to bridge divides.
17. We commend all efforts by Commonwealth organisations and agencies to develop greater education resources and to create an enabling environment to foster an enterprise culture. We encourage all governments, noting the value of distance education and the benefits of technology, to draw upon best practices throughout the Commonwealth and welcome the increased support for education in the Commonwealth through the new Centre for Commonwealth Education at Cambridge University.

Youth

18. We recognise that more than 50 per cent of the population of the Commonwealth is below 30 years of age. All Commonwealth efforts to achieve the MDGs must reflect this demographic reality by including young people in development and democracy.

Combating Illicit Trafficking in Human Beings

19. We recognise the growing problem of human trafficking, especially in women and children. We are committed to combating this scourge through international co-operation and we call on member countries which have not yet done so to ratify the UN Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime and Protocols.

Partnership for Peace and Prosperity

20. We strongly reaffirm our commitment to multilateralism, international co-operation, partnership, and productive working relationships between government and civil society organisations. We also reaffirm our commitment to enhance global democracy, by ensuring that international institutions reflect the voice of their developing country members and are themselves models of good practice in democratic accountability, participation and transparency. We recognise that the Commonwealth as an association has distinctive strengths and comparative advantages that could be effectively utilised for the mutual benefit of member states. We therefore urge greater partnership within our community.
21. Furthermore we urge all countries to implement their commitments under the Monterrey Consensus and the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.
22. We commend the African Union for taking the bold step to address development and good governance through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). In this regard, we support the Commonwealth Secretariat's activities in developing a comprehensive programme of assistance to support the efforts of Commonwealth countries in Africa.
23. We recognise that conflict and instability erode the prospects of development. We are therefore committed to help mobilise international support and resources for conflict prevention, resolution and management. We also commit ourselves to efforts to curb illicit trade in small arms and light weapons and to support prompt response in providing international assistance to conflict areas.

Conclusion

24. We urge the Commonwealth Secretary-General to direct resources to support the priorities identified in this Declaration. We also urge relevant Commonwealth Ministerial Meetings to give additional momentum to these priorities, and request the Secretary-General to provide a report on progress made to the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

8 December 2003

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