

Foreword

by Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon

Increasing terrorism, armed conflicts, hunger, poverty and disease – these have regrettably already become some of the hallmarks of the first three years of a millennium that started with so much hope and optimism.

While hundreds of millions in the developing world suffer from poverty, disease and conflict, even those in the most developed countries find themselves facing new threats to their personal safety and security as terrorism spreads its ugly tentacles.

Our small and fragile world could be so very different, so much better. Who and what can make a difference and bring about change for the better? What good, for example, is the Commonwealth in these troubled times?

I strongly believe that the Commonwealth has never been more relevant or important. We embrace a great diversity of states, large and small, rich and poor, island and land-locked. We provide a unique forum for discussion between the haves and have-nots; our smallest members are listened to, alongside the bigger nations. What other organisation provides the opportunity for a leader from a small island state to sit at the same table with the head of a G8 nation as equals?

Our approach counters the growing concern among many countries that they are excluded from international decision-making. We strongly believe that multilateralism has an important role to play in today's world. By our inclusive and consensus-based approach, we try to minimise or eliminate the kinds of festering resentments that can all too easily erupt in conflict. We don't always get it right but we often do; when we do, we improve people's lives and, sometimes, save lives.

The Commonwealth is striving to make the world a fair marketplace for its members' goods and services. The single biggest measure developed countries could take to tackle world poverty would be to end trade-distorting subsidies. Sadly, talk is long and cheap on this topic; delivery is short and progress painfully slow.

Because of the lacklustre response from those who should know better, I have continued to argue passionately at every opportunity for improved market access, particularly in agriculture, for developing member countries. It was my key message at the UN's International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey in

March 2002, and at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August 2002. I repeated the plea for reform at the European Commission in Brussels and the World Trade Organisation in Geneva earlier this year.

My strong stand on the issue of agricultural subsidies comes from the simple fact that world poverty cannot be reduced if the big players – the United States, Europe and Japan – do not live up to their commitments to reduce or eliminate tariff barriers. The failure of the Cancún WTO meeting was disappointing but it cannot be allowed to sidetrack the Development Round.

Development remains central to the Commonwealth's work, as most of our members are developing countries. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) is a flexible instrument which promotes social and economic development by enabling member countries to share skills and knowledge.

However, I am genuinely concerned that the CFTC will lose its relevance and meaning unless it receives greater funding. Its value has fallen by nearly 40 per cent in real terms since 1990, and while I welcome the increased contributions over the last few years from donors and beneficiaries, even more is needed to sustain it in the long term.

The promotion of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance is another key area of our work. We have wide experience and strong credentials, and no other organisation has done more to show it means business in upholding its core values. The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group remains a unique and resolute custodian of these principles.

Similarly, no organisation has done more to win the confidence of its own members. The Commonwealth's good offices are a byword on every continent and reflect the enormous trust our members have in us, relying on our experience and discretion to help resolve sensitive domestic issues.

We are privileged also to have the support of an extensive network of civil society organisations and individuals, who, through



their commitment and expertise, help others in the Commonwealth achieve growth, strengthen their institutions and enrich their communities.

Finally, over the past 18 months, we have set out to implement new governance arrangements for the Commonwealth Secretariat, in accordance with the recommendations made by leaders in Coolum. We now have a more focused and efficient Secretariat, allowing for greater cohesion and more effective co-ordination. The new arrangements have led to increased efficiency and transparency, and given governments more active involvement in setting directions and providing oversight of resources.

I would like to thank Prime Minister John Howard of Australia for his guidance and support as Chairperson-in-Office since the Coolum summit.

I am sure that the Abuja Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, under the chairmanship of President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, will help us to build on our achievements, generate new partnerships and provide a strong basis for our work in promoting the security, freedom and prosperity of the 1.8 billion people of the Commonwealth.

Don McKinnon, 15 September 2003