

## PATHS OUT OF POVERTY

Commonwealth concern over global poverty is rooted in its recognition that about 1.3 billion people in developing countries are poor and that half of them live in seven Commonwealth countries alone. Eighteen of the Commonwealth's countries are classed by the World Bank as being low income (with a GNP per capita of under US\$700) and a further 10 as being middle income (US\$700 to \$2,500). Fifty per cent of the world's poor children live in three Commonwealth countries.

This concern was first expressed by Commonwealth Heads of Government in the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles in 1971. At the 1993 CHOGM, Heads of Government declared their belief in the Right to Development and described this right as indistinguishable from other human rights. In particular, they emphasised that resolving related problems of poverty and food security had to remain a strategic priority for the Commonwealth if sustainable development was to be achieved.

Since 80 to 90 per cent of the poor and hungry live in rural areas, they also urged continued assistance to member countries who wished to implement better rural policies and programmes. They stressed the particular vulnerability of women and children.

The commitment to assist members to eradicate poverty is reflected in all activities of the Secretariat. Broadly, they aim to assist member countries to develop and implement sound sustainable development policies that are beneficial to all their people. At one level, the Secretariat works with other international organisations to promote a stable international economic framework within which equitable and sustainable economic progress can be achieved. At another, various economic and social development programmes foster consensus, and provide advice and technical assistance in a wide range of areas,

including economic growth, human resource development, gender equality, youth, and science and technology.

At their annual meetings, Commonwealth Finance Ministers discuss subjects which have direct implications for the poor, such as structural adjustment policies and programmes, the social costs of adjustment, social safety nets to protect vulnerable groups, especially women and children, and the debt problems of poor countries.

The Secretariat also assists countries in trade policy matters, in recognition that a more liberal trade regime would help alleviate poverty by allowing producers in poor countries to gain greater access to the markets of wealthier nations for their goods, such as textiles and clothing. The Secretariat is especially concerned with helping to meet the particular needs of small states.

Some Secretariat activities have specifically addressed poverty and food security. Rural poverty alleviation policies and programmes in Commonwealth Africa and Asia have been examined, and following the 1992 Commonwealth Consultation on Poverty Alleviation in Sri Lanka, an overall framework which explicitly included poverty-reduction objectives in policies and programmes for development was recommended. Rural, agriculture-led growth strategies, in which the poor participate fully, were seen to be essential elements.

The Secretariat continues to work in this area, especially in assisting countries to integrate gender aspects into policies on food security and rural development. Around 70 per cent of the world's poor are women and the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development outlines a strategy to the year 2000 which will contribute towards the reduction and elimination of poverty. A project on Incorporating Gender into Food

Security Policies in Commonwealth Africa reflects the recognition of the relationship between poverty and food security. In 1994/95, experts met to develop common guidelines for the preparation of five country reports on Botswana, Ghana, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and a detailed outline for a proposed handbook on the issue, combining suggestions and guidelines for governments, the private sector and NGOs.

Human resource development is vital in the battle against poverty. The Secretariat's efforts in this area are guided by the recommendations of a Commonwealth Working Group report, *Foundation for the Future*. Five key strategies were identified to enhance the value of human resources: well managed and more professional government, partnership with NGOs and the private sector, priority for women, mobilisation of resources, and the use of technology. In many developing countries, structural adjustment measures have had severe impacts on the education and health sectors, and thus on the poor. The Secretariat provides various types of assistance to mitigate their effects and they are described in detail elsewhere in this Report.

Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Youth Affairs, who met in Trinidad and Tobago in May

1995, also considered a number of issues which bore on poverty and the vulnerability of young people. These include the empowerment of young women and men, particularly their access to resources and participation in decision-making, youth policies and structures and human resource development for youth.

Through programmes carried out by the Commonwealth Science Council, the Secretariat continues to promote the scientific and technological capacities and capabilities of member countries, helping to reduce poverty by facilitating improved and more sustainable economic, social and environmental development. Operating in parallel with these programmes, the CFTC provides technical assistance in a wide range of disciplines aimed at reducing poverty through sustainable development.

The Secretariat plans to act as a resource centre for 'best practice' in successful poverty-reduction programmes across the Commonwealth and as a catalyst linking funders of such programmes and implementing countries. A compendium of best practice will be developed which will be used in a series of regional roundtable workshops involving public and private sector and NGO representatives.



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