Executive Summary

This report, which contains the analyses and findings of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding, has been guided by the need to develop policy recommendations for Commonwealth Heads of Government, informed by a clear appreciation of the importance and reach of the underlying concepts that give the Commission its name. This report is, thus, both about recommendations of policies to be pursued and about the ways in which policy thinking has to adapt to the realities of the world in which we live. If the cultivation of respect and understanding is both important in itself and consequential in reducing violence and terrorism in the world, the link between the two lies in the understanding that cultivated violence is generated through fomenting disrespect and fostering confrontational misunderstandings. While the report discusses various policy directions as well as particular policy measures, the Commission has requested the Secretary-General to follow up with further specifications for an action programme in consultation with the respective governments.

The Commission was established in response to the decision at the 2005 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to request the Commonwealth Secretary-General 'to explore initiatives to promote mutual understanding and respect among all faiths and communities in the Commonwealth'. The Commission, appointed by the Secretary-General and comprising eleven experts from a wide range of disciplines and professional backgrounds, met twice in 2006–07 to prepare its report, and also had extensive correspondence and interchange of ideas and suggestions.

With a third of the world's population, the Commonwealth is home to rich and poor, young and old, and people of every colour and creed. It is also an organisation that strives hard to make democracy a way of life. Its composition is inclusive of all political and economic groupings – its 53 members come from every geographical region, represent every stage of development, and include people from all the major religions.

The shared history and traditions of Commonwealth members has yielded administrative, educational and legal lessons that provide fertile ground for the exchange of ideas and best practice. The Commonwealth has used these to good effect, particularly in its support for the poorest and the most marginalised – women, young people, indigenous groups, and the rural poor – particularly those in least-developed countries, including those in small island states.

The Commission believes that the response to confrontational problems should be rooted in the Commonwealth's agreed fundamental emphasis on human rights, liberties, democratic societies, gender equality, the rule of law and a political culture that promotes transparency, accountability and economic development. It is also important to appreciate that the Commonwealth is not just a family of nations; it is also a family of peoples. Furthermore, the Commonwealth provides a shared forum in which governments and civil society meet as partners and as equals. With over 85 pan-Commonwealth professional associations and civil society organisations, the Commonwealth family connects through institutional as well as personal links, and operates through cultural as well as political, social and economic affiliations.

Drawing on the participation of and consultation with its civil society partners, the Commonwealth makes decisions on the basis of negotiation, dialogue, precedent and consensus. This so-called 'Commonwealth approach' of working ensures that members respect each other and try to understand, as fully as possible, the points of view of others. It is to this that the great leader of our time – and former President of South Africa – Nelson Mandela referred in 1994 when he argued that 'the Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity'.

The need for new thinking about the conflicts in the world

Cultural – indeed 'civilisational' – explanations of world conflict have acquired much popularity recently, to some extent inspired by Samuel Huntington's thesis on the inevitability of 'the clash of civilisations'. That thesis has gained further popularity since the terrible events of 9/11. There has been much discussion about what appears to be an irreconcilable divide between the values of 'us' and 'them' – most notably between the 'West and the rest', between Muslims and non-Muslims. While many have argued, both before and after 9/11, that culture is neither the defining nor the only fault line over which people conflict, the question of how to address the many root causes of conflict has gained a new urgency.

This report has particularly focused on the issues of terrorism, extremism, conflict and violence, for they are much in ascendancy in the contemporary world and afflict the Commonwealth countries as well as the rest of the world. The report investigates the different ways in which such conflicts and violence emerge and are sustained and enlarged. While the cultural influences are among the forces that can contribute to disrespect, misunderstanding and violence, they are not the only causal factors, nor are they immutable or irresistible. Indeed, much can be done to prevent the violence that may be thrust on us by promoters of belligerent agendas. For this we need a departure from old ways of thinking about the centrality and the alleged inviolability of cultural confrontations.

The focus can be put instead on understanding the mechanisms through which violence is cultivated through advocacy and recruitment, and on the pre-existing inequalities, deprivations and humiliations on which those advocacies draw. These diagnoses also clear the way for methods of countering fostered disaffection and violence. In various chapters the different connections are explored and examined to yield general policy recommendations.

Inequality, grievance and history

Beginning with the connection between respect and understanding, on the one hand, and disquiet, disaffection and violence, on the other (Chapter 1), the report explores the various ways through which violence is generated and sometimes wilfully nurtured (Chapter 2).

The role of poverty and inequality in fostering disquiet and hatred, and violence in particular, call for some sophistication of analysis, since the connections are not by any means mechanical and invariant. And yet there are connections, which are discussed in the report (Chapter 3). In addition to manifest inequality, the psychological dimensions of humiliation also demand some depth of analysis.

The history of the world matters to contemporary problems, since the effects of past maltreatment and humiliation can last for a very long time (Chapter 4). The civil paths must, therefore, include addressing past as well as present humiliations. The connections over time, for example through colonial history, are important to understand to appreciate the roots of the actual continuation of inequality and the perceptions of injustice that are seen as being meted out to less privileged parts of humanity. Sometimes the sources of a sense of iniquity and humiliation are real, and they call for remedying (the Scarman Report chaired by Lord Scarman in 1982 is cited here as a good example of policy recommendations following from visionary but detailed diagnoses). When, as is sometimes the case, the confrontational perceptions are exaggerated by confusion (or magnified through extremist instigation), those misapprehensions should still have to be addressed through civil means, with good use of discussion, open scrutiny and a willingness on the part of others to listen to complaints and grievances. The outcomes of these changes would have to be periodically evaluated, in a systematic way, since complex and long-standing problems are not easily eradicated.

Participation, the media and education

If participation is an important part of a suitably multilateral approach to world peace (following the so-called Commonwealth approach), the critical role of political participation within the borders of a country can hardly be over-emphasised (Chapter 5). Attention has to be paid to the reach of the forums for discussion, from central to local, and to ensure that deprived persons are not excluded from the opportunity of joining in and voicing their questions and concerns.

Even though some champions of what they call 'multiculturalism' have shown great hostility to the idea of a national identity, there is nothing in that political concept that reduces the relevance of culture, or religion, or language, in their own respective domains. Indeed, a national identity can be used to give each person an acknowledged equality in political participation, irrespective of religion, race, caste, dialect, or community, or – for that matter – their date of immigration (when that is an issue).

The development of civil society is another area to which special attention has to be paid. A variety of groupings, based on different affiliations, need encouragement and support: the diversity of associations helps to bring neglected concerns to public attention. Governments and civil society organisations have to ensure that those who are consulted are representative of widely held sentiments that can be fairly attributed to the respective groups. Vocal but peaceful political participation can then have the dual role of (1) leading to a more informed making of public policy, and (2) removing discontent about not being heard, which can ultimately contribute to rage and violence.

The Commission believes it is particularly important to pay special attention to women's political participation, since this is often seriously neglected. In this field, the Commonwealth has quite a wealth of initiatives and experiences (some of which the report has discussed), and the different countries can benefit from the experiences of each other.

The Commission submits that it is extremely important to see the role of an unrestrained and flourishing media in helping political participation and dialogue, allowing grievances to be aired and

addressed, and facilitating the hearing that public appreciation and complaints should receive (Chapter 6). More specifically the media, encouraged by governments and civil society, can convey a more constructive approach to promoting understanding; tackle causes of grievance and humiliation that underlie the appeal of extremist and instigating messages; help transcend warring boundaries and promote understanding; and develop a fuller understanding of international issues. The Commission emphasises the importance of supporting the media in their constructive efforts – from the operation of training institutions to the actual day-to-day practice of responsible journalism.

The Commission does, of course, recognise that media portrayals can sometimes exacerbate a narrative of oppositional forces, and strengthen, rather than weaken, grievance and disaffection. The media can also, often enough, oversimplify the complexity of current problems. These dangers are there and have to be guarded against (the restraint should come primarily from the internal discipline of good journalism), but they do not, in any way, reduce the importance of the constructive role of the media in giving people more information and more understanding of each other, and also in making them more equipped to deal with potential sources of tension.

Education and young people

The Commission argues that it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of non-sectarian and non-parochial education that expands, rather than reduces, the reach of understanding and reason (Chapter 7). The Commission believes that governments should, as a matter of urgency, give priority to the necessary investment for the universal reach of well-grounded basic education. Inequality in the distribution of education shapes the incidence of exclusion, which is a source of unfairness in itself and can also be a prelude to hostility.

Educational content is crucially linked with the promotion of respect and understanding – or the opposite. The educational curriculum is central in embodying and communicating values and messages about the relationships and understandings between and across diverse identity groups related to different systems of partitioning. Knowledge of world history is particularly critical in helping to forge cosmopolitan identities, as is teaching children about the cultural heritage of a range of ethnic, racial, national, tribal and religious communities. Similarly, teaching children about the value and purpose of social cohesion based on mutual equality is another important objective. Well-designed education can also help in the adaptation of immigrants to their host or new home societies.

The interest and involvement of young people are important not only in the process of education, but also for their contribution to the development of a harmonious society. While the attention that their education demands should never be neglected, it would be a mistake to treat young people as mere recipients of the plans for their instruction made by others, rather than seeing them as thinking beings, whose concerns and enthusiasms can powerfully enrich social life.

The Commission also emphasises the particular role of sports in which the young are commonly involved. Sport should be a vocation open to all people, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, gender or economic circumstances. Given social arrangements for special events, sport can become a reality even for those with a disability. Rigorous training and a commitment to winning medals for one's

nation can help overcome many perceived divides within that nation. The Commonwealth Games, and since 2000 the Commonwealth Youth Games, are existing institutional features in which an agenda of greater respect and understanding can helpfully find a direct place, in addition to the indirect contribution they automatically make.

Multilateral approaches

The Commission has been much guided by appreciation of the arguments behind the use of multilateral approaches and their convincing track record. Multilateral consultations and interactions can be of pervasive importance and usefulness in determining appropriate means for pursuing peace and security. The Commission attaches great importance to the Commonwealth's role in placing constructive emphasis on the use of a dialogue-based and consensus-building approach, which can better deliver benefits to all, and also deal more effectively with issues of group-based conflict in the world today.

The potential usefulness of this approach is extensive, perhaps even ubiquitous. To consider a particularly difficult case, the Commission strongly recommends that the Commonwealth's efforts in Zimbabwe must not only continue, but must be strengthened. The Commission also believes that the 'Commonwealth approach' of dialogue and consensus-building may have relevance in other parts of the world: the Commonwealth governments could usefully adopt such an approach in Iraq, where there is a huge – and growing – need for greater multilateral engagements; in Afghanistan, where the international community could strengthen the inclusive initiatives (the report discusses this issue in some detail); and in the conflicts involving Israel and Palestine, where the resumption of dialogue and the cultivation of mutual understanding are critically important. The Commission also argues that multilateralism has relevance in fighting injustice at the international level where some regions and countries have not benefited from the restructuring of the world trade system and where they continue to have little influence over decisions taken in this regard.

The Commission suggests that the Commonwealth Secretary-General's Good Offices work should be extended to address grievance internationally. More particularly, the Commission urges the Commonwealth to use its considerable experience to advocate greater use of multilateral approaches in international disputes and confrontations, working with the United Nations and other international organisations.

The reach of civil paths

Civil paths to peace, the Commission argues, are important and can be very effective. Aside from individual policies, some of which have been spelt out in some detail in the report, there is a big general need for understanding the reach and rationale of using civil paths. The need for hard security measures does not in any way reduce the abiding relevance of pursuing the civil routes.

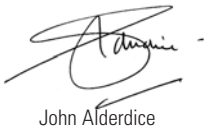
The Commission argues, in particular, that there is a strong need for much more dialogue and discussion on the richness of human identities and the counterproductive nature of placing people in rigidly separated identity-boxes, linked with religion or community (no matter how positively

each religion or each community is described). The importance of people's cosmopolitan identity also demands greater recognition than it tends to get, without denying the relevance of other identities that can comfortably co-exist with a global outlook.

At the international level, civil paths will be inescapably linked with multilateral approaches across borders. At the national level, the avoidance of sectarian divisions within a nation can be a very important component of the civil approach to peace, and the positive features of a non-divisive national political identity should get, the Commission argues, a clear and ungrudging recognition. The Secretary-General has agreed to develop a number of initiatives in consultation with Commonwealth Heads and their governments, for which we hope the resources would be forthcoming. These could helpfully build on the Commonwealth's existing work, or complement the priorities of other organisations, including those of the United Nations (such as the recommendations of the UN's Alliance of Civilisations). Such an action programme would be an important and necessary next step to the Commission's report.

Accepting diversity, respecting all human beings, and understanding the richness of perspectives that people have are of great relevance for all the Commonwealth countries, and for our 1.8 billion people. They are also important for the rest of the world. The civil paths to peace are presented here for use both inside the Commonwealth and beyond its boundaries. The Commonwealth has survived and flourished, despite the hostilities associated with past colonial history, through the use of a number of far-sighted guiding principles. The Commission argues that those principles have continuing relevance today for the future of the Commonwealth – and also for the world at large.

Amartya Sen



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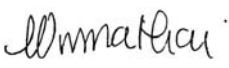

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