

Fifteenth Meeting of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment 16 February 2009

Summary Statement by the Chair

Commonwealth Ministers of Environment and Senior Officials met on 16 February 2009 at the fifteenth session of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment (CCGE). The meeting was convened to coincide with the 25th Session of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Governing Council/ Global Ministerial Environment Forum held in Nairobi. It was chaired by the Hon. Benny Allan, MP, Minister of Environment and Conservation, Papua New Guinea. The discussion focused on the next steps in taking forward International Environmental Governance reforms.

In opening the meeting, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Mr Kamalesh Sharma, outlined the mandate from Commonwealth Heads of Government in 2007 to advocate for wide-ranging reforms of international institutions that would take special account of the needs of Least Developed Countries and small states. Further discussions by Commonwealth leaders in June 2008, and again in September 2008, agreed six over-arching principles to guide the reform of all international governance – legitimacy, representation, responsiveness, flexibility, transparency and effectiveness. Leaders, in their consideration of a Commonwealth agenda on reform, had given prominence to management of the global environment. They recognised the need to integrate a new system of environmental governance with development priorities, and saw a comprehensive system of international governance as essential to achieving sustainable development. Commonwealth leaders had asked Commonwealth Environment Ministers to take forward work on these issues, especially the process leading to reform which might include an international conference as one option. This was the matter before the CCGE. The Commonwealth Secretary-General added that the climate change impacts being faced by Pacific small island states also exemplified the urgency of the matter.

Mr John Scanlon, speaking on behalf of the UNEP Executive Director, Mr Achim Steiner, noted that there was both appetite and interest in moving ahead on International Environmental Governance reforms, and that this would be one of the key themes of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum this year. In particular, UNEP was keen to develop an understanding of international environmental governance arrangements as they were experienced at the national level. As the work was taken forward, it would also be important to get fresh thinking into the debate through other forums such as the Commonwealth. Mr Felix Dodds of Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future outlined a range of process-options for taking forward the consideration of international environment governance reforms.

In their discussion, delegates welcomed the work that the Secretariat had been undertaking in support of the reform agenda determined by Commonwealth leaders and expressed appreciation for the background paper. Delegates considered what steps might be taken internationally, and within a Commonwealth context, to progress international environmental governance reforms.

Delegates supported international efforts to improve international environmental governance. They acknowledged that environmental concerns were strategic and cross-cutting in nature. The environment was over-arching and could not be treated as a stand-alone issue. Some spoke about the need to strengthen UNEP and bring a development perspective into its mandate. Some also

emphasised that gender concerns need to become more fully part of the international environmental governance debate. One delegate urged the Commonwealth to raise environmental awareness amongst parliamentarians and build their understanding of the role of women in addressing environmental concerns. Others talked about the principles that should underpin any reforms. Suggestions included making the principles operational by examining them against the current system, and by making them more detailed and action-oriented. Another was to include principles that addressed current concerns, such as closing the implementation gap, providing adequate financial and technical support, ensuring that the environmental needs of both current and future generations are secured, and being responsive to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable.

While acknowledging the need for greater streamlining and consistency within the system, one delegate cautioned that major reforms might also have downsides. He expressed the concerns of some that the objectives of reforms might relate more closely to reducing the financial burdens, than achieving greater coherence. The legal structure of many multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) meant a major systemic reform could require the re-negotiation of some agreements and that vulnerable countries, especially small island developing states, could be disadvantaged by this. Clustering of MEAs could be addressed within the current structure and reforms should be carried out in a phased way.

Ministers discussed the relationship between international environmental governance reform processes and discussions on climate change governance in the lead-up to the Copenhagen climate change conference in December 2009. There were different opinions on the urgency of developing a perspective on international environmental governance reforms for consideration during climate change negotiations. Some were concerned that such an approach could slow down the climate change process to the detriment of highly vulnerable states. One delegate was concerned that the climate change process could forge agreements that would significantly influence the form that international environmental governance reform processes could take in future and suggested that a separate discussion on climate change governance arrangements might urgently be required. Another said that more information might be needed on the range of climate change funds that were available and their access criteria.

Some delegates felt that existing processes on international environmental governance should be given more opportunity, and cautioned against any new or separate process being created that could divert resources and energy from on-going debates.

It was the general sense of the meeting that future Commonwealth discussions on international environmental governance reforms could benefit from the work of a group of experts drawn from all regions. The deliberations of this group could feed into discussions at the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Trinidad in November 2009. Delegates also urged the Commonwealth to work closely with UNEP on these matters.

The CCGE asked the Chair, with the support of the Commonwealth Secretariat, to establish a group of experts through consultation with members, and also for the Commonwealth Secretariat to consult the membership in respect to the Chair and venue of the next session.

Nairobi, 17 February 2009