



# **Commonwealth Secretariat**

## **Briefing Note – Climate Change**

### **The challenge**

Climate change is a critical concern for Commonwealth member states, which number among the most vulnerable to climate change in the world. Around half of our member countries are classified as Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Most of them are geographically located either within or close to the tropics where even small changes in average temperatures can have major impacts.

Small states, low-lying coastal states and African countries will be particularly hard-hit. Not only do these countries face some of the most challenging physical impacts – such as sea-level rise, more damage from hurricanes and possible food shortages – but they also have fewer resources to respond to the challenges (money, experts and institutions). Small states also have fewer options and alternatives for adapting to climate change.

### **The Commonwealth strategy**

In 2007, our Heads of Government agreed the Lake Victoria Commonwealth Climate Change Action Plan. This was a statement of political will at the highest level to take action on climate change, supported by a practical programme of work. This began efforts to:

- build negotiating capacities for vulnerable member states;
- support research and debate in areas such as forests, food miles and trade and climate change; and
- develop skills, for example, in modelling the impact of climate change on agriculture and food security.

In the last two years, the Commonwealth has used its networks to deepen the response of governments and people to climate change. Commonwealth finance ministers, health ministers, parliamentarians, young people, human rights experts, built environment professionals and those involved in disaster risk management have all begun to examine and address the social and economic implications of climate change.

### **Key principles**

The six elements of the 2007 Lake Victoria Action Plan are as follows:

- Strengthening quality and participation in climate change negotiations.
- Promoting action through Commonwealth networks to deepen consideration of the economic and human aspects of climate change.
- Improved land use management and sustainable use of forest resources (including

increased international support for, and knowledge of, the Iwokrama programme in Guyana).

- Work on the issue of transported exports.
- Support for natural disaster management in member countries.
- Technical assistance to least developed countries and small states.

### **The practical response**

Example of work undertaken in response to the plan include:

1. Small state climate change negotiators (Windsor, UK, May 2008) met to deepen their understanding of current negotiations. The group developed a list of the key technical information gaps and needs that small states are expected to address to support their negotiating process, and agreed a set of priority outcomes for small states to focus on in the negotiations.
2. *Commonwealth finance officials* shared experiences (St Lucia, October 2008) in conducting studies of the economics of climate change, using Australia's Garnaut Report as a case study.
3. In April 2009, Dr Teresa Bastow of the Freedom of Information Centre at the UK National Archives, and Honorary Secretary of the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers, implemented a scoping mission to Iwokrama to plan-out how to open the Centre's archives and share the lessons it has gained in sustainably managing and using an area of tropical forest.
4. The Secretariat has implemented a study on the complex inter-relationship of *trade and climate in small states and smaller developing countries* (due to be published in December 2009).
5. An African Regional Conference on Comprehensive Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (Kampala, Uganda, 1–6 November 2009), jointly sponsored with Uganda's Ministry of Relief and Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, will help strengthen the ability of government institutions in Africa to integrate risk reduction into development planning and implementation, based on an exchange of experiences and approaches.
6. A resource economist has been recruited to support *economic assessment of climate change impacts and measures in the Caribbean*. The CFTC expert is attached to the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre in Belize and is working closely with governments, universities and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in a study on the 'Regional Economics of Climate Change'.

### **Ministerial meetings or other highlights**

- *Finance Ministers Meeting*: In October 2007, Commonwealth finance ministers recognised the critical role for finance and planning ministries in addressing challenges of climate change and called for a Commonwealth initiative on the economics of climate change to help member states develop and promote common positions and take practical action on the basis of a clear understanding of the implications of climate change for their economies.
- *Health Ministers Meeting*: Commonwealth health ministers (Geneva, Switzerland, May 2009) shared concerns on health and climate change. Outcomes include a web portal with background papers, case studies and the results of a survey of country needs.

Also, a Discussion Paper that examines climate change and health policy priorities that addresses the needs of the poor.

- *Youth:* The Young Commonwealth Climate Change Summit (London, 28-30 October 2009) launched a process of developing the Commonwealth Youth Climate Change Response Policy and Action Plan. The summit facilitated the exchange of experiences and the advancement of collective knowledge among young people and their communities, and established a youth-led movement which will analyse and translate climate change scenarios into effective policy development and improved understanding of impacts on young people's health, well-being and economic success in a sustainable future.
- *Human Rights:* Following the adoption by the UN Human Rights Council of a resolution, sponsored by Maldives, on the importance of climate change on human rights, the Commonwealth Secretariat's Human Rights Unit conducted a side event (Geneva, March 2009) to discuss the significance of advocating the rights approach to the debate on climate change bearing in mind that the impacts of climate change affect key rights such as the right to life, food, housing and livelihoods. The meeting was attended by the Maldives Foreign Minister, other Commonwealth missions in Geneva and experts on climate change. The Secretariat is now working with member countries to help shape thinking and practical suggestions on the human rights uptake of climate change work in view of the UN Climate Change conference being held in December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark.
- *Education Ministers Meeting:* Commonwealth education ministers (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, June 2009) urged the Secretariat to focus its work to 2012 in eight areas, including education for sustainable development, with a particular emphasis on climate change.

### **Beyond CHOGM**

The 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is a critical moment in time. Experts tell us that we only have a few years to halt and reverse our current emission trends if we are to avoid the most dangerous effects of climate change. For countries like Tuvalu, Kiribati and Maldives, this is a matter of survival.

CHOGM 2009 provides the opportunity for the weight of 53 states to be brought to bear in forging a strong outcome from the Copenhagen summit. In particular, it is an opportunity to ensure that the needs and concerns of the smallest and most vulnerable countries can be understood and taken into account as we move towards Copenhagen.

We are seeking to build political will for a bold outcome from Copenhagen that will help to address, in particular, the needs of the poor, small states and vulnerable countries. We also hope that leaders will consider how front-line states can best be supported in concrete and practical terms as they grapple with climate change.

All countries are getting ready for climate change, and the Commonwealth has an important role to play in ensuring that the voices of vulnerable communities and countries are heard in this matter. It can also support the efforts of small states and vulnerable countries in securing sustainable development and building economies that are both low in carbon and have greater resilience to climate change.