

12 August 2010

Kamalesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General
Statement on International Youth Day 2010

In December 2009, the United Nations General Assembly agreed that the year which begins today – International Youth Day, 12 August 2010 – would be celebrated as the ‘International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding’. The last such specially dedicated year was 25 years ago, in 1985, and in 2010/11 every UN member state is challenged to inspire its young people with the ideas of peace, freedom, progress, solidarity and dedication to the objectives and goals of progress and development.

The Commonwealth joins the rest of the world in celebrating and acknowledging the role of young people in making our society a better place. We are a young Commonwealth, with half of us under 25 years of age. Our young people – their talent, energy and creativity – represent our greatest untapped resource for development, and the embodiment of our hope for the future of all our communities, and of the world. They have been at the centre of our thinking and our actions since 1974, when we set up the Commonwealth Youth programme which is now active across six continents, from its regional bases in Georgetown, Lusaka, Chandigarh, and Honiara.

My message to young people this year is a direct one. This is your year, so let your voice be heard. Have your say on the issues and challenges that define our times: democracy, development, human rights, peace building, climate change, employment, and health. Our world today cries out for young people who are committed to shaping better societies. These are the youth who need to stand up and be counted, and who are not afraid to get involved and work for a better future. My message applies equally to adults: embrace and empower young people – they are not just the future; they are the present. And my message is not just for 2010: it is for always.

But in 2010, I call on young people in national youth councils, schools, youth clubs, faith or non-governmental organisations, to make this year one that will be long remembered.

It was in November 2009 that Commonwealth Heads of Government, meeting in Port-of-Spain, agreed their own declaration on ‘Investing in Young People’. They also gave us further instructions as to how to do so. One was to strengthen our member countries’ ability to bring a youth consideration – with budgets and actions to match – into almost every branch of government. We are producing a definitive resource on this. Another was to promote a comprehensive way of promoting young entrepreneurs, as the job creators, not the job seekers, of the future. We have tried and tested models for identifying young entrepreneurs, working with them on their business plans, training them, seed-funding them, mentoring them, and working with them to evaluate their progress. The task is to grow the models which have begun successfully and to share them even further across the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is playing its part in the global enterprise of giving a youth a voice. It is the voice which will define our future.

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