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***Our young people as agents of change:
a statement from the Commonwealth Secretary-General***

I am especially delighted to be among you at the 7th Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting here in Colombo. You may know that I took office on April Fools Day, 1st April, and that on 3rd April my very first public task was to open a Youth Stakeholders meeting at the Commonwealth's headquarters in London. Now – within a month of my taking office, and with a trip to Africa in the interim – I attend my first Commonwealth Ministerial Meeting. Nothing could have gladdened me more than that the Meeting is dedicated to youth. Trying to better young people's lives will be one of my absolute priorities as Commonwealth Secretary-General. I have been engaged in this great task in my earlier professional life as well, on account of the conviction that youth encapsulates our collective hope, and is the primary national and global resource to safeguard our future.

We are a young Commonwealth of nearly two billion people – half of us, nearly a billion people, are under twenty five, a quarter under five. The demographers tell us that we are getting ever younger.

In our hearts, the debate is won. We cherish the flower of youth, not the blight of youth. We believe that young people will lift us up, not draw us down. They embody our hope, in a sea of anxieties. But our hearts are not talking to our heads: if we believe these things, our response is not commensurate. With one billion young men and women entering the workforce in the period 2000-2015, do we still see a 'resource'? Or a 'drain'?

In over thirty years of development work, I have become ever more conscious that neglecting young people is not an option, and indeed that to neglect them is fraught with a huge risk to our own future, in a rapidly changing world. Wisdom and knowledge are now seen as a feature of youth, as well as of age. The effects of globalisation, positive and negative, flow above all through young people. If today's challenges are to be solved, they will be solved by today's young people, and if any enlightened knowledge society is to be created, it will be created through them.

It is my contention that youth and women – for so long the objects of exclusion – are the greatest contemporary agents of change and of transformation. To let them be so is one of the great challenges of the 21st Century. Climate change, HIV/AIDS, energy security, terrorism and the different guises of globalised crime,

and any number of other current anxieties: these are *new* problems. The challenge and responsibility of empowering young people and women is, in fact, as old as time.

There are two main strands to this 7th Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting in the large agenda of youth. The first is that of youth and peace-building. The second is that of youth policy and funding – *our* own, in the Commonwealth Youth Programme; and *your* own, in the work of your governments, both their Youth Ministries and their other Ministries, who need to consider youth in precisely everything they do.

It pays to consider a few elements of factual context.

That, for instance, the ILO tells us that 115 million children worldwide have never been to school ... or that 200 million youths live on less than a dollar day ... or that 130 million are illiterate, 88 million are unemployed, and 10 million live with HIV. Beyond these numbers come those we can't quantify: the marginalized, the embittered, the depressed.

And why have we chosen the specific theme of youth and peace-building? Because the world is not at peace. Worldwide, an estimated 300,000 people under 18 are now, or have recently been, involved in armed conflict. Another 500,000 have been recruited into military or paramilitary forces. Take the example of Northern Uganda, where 20,000 youngsters have been abducted, abused, and brutalised, and a further 1.6 million displaced and made idle, dependent and demoralised.

Sri Lanka, our host nation, gives us context in both of our themes. Again, the statistics tell the story. Teenagers and young adults constitute 60% of the unemployed in this country. And, in turn, 60% of those young unemployed have passed their Ordinary Level exam, or hold higher qualifications. And Sri Lanka itself knows only too well the reality of conflict, with young people caught up in its internal struggles – enrolled as soldiers, and victims of violence.

But we come here not to enumerate failures and insuperable problems, but to celebrate successes and to find the way to more. Because the Commonwealth rises to these challenges – it sets out its principles, and puts them into practice.

The Commonwealth sees young people as partners, participants, resources, and inheritors of the world. It wants their voice to be heard, not muffled. It seeks their representation and involvement at every level of shared community life – local, national, regional, even global. All this is enshrined in the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment 2000-2015, with its specific focus on meeting the youth targets among the Millennium Development Goals, and its new concerns – added when the Plan of Action was updated in 2007 – to focus

on the environment, the 'professionalisation' of the youth sector, and its ability to monitor and evaluate progress.

In the same way, it views young people as peace-builders. Last November, the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding, chaired by Amartya Sen, put forward its view of young people's role as agents of positive change. It was no coincidence that a dynamic youth leader from Tonga sat on that Commission, and ensured its youth perspective.

The resulting publication *Civil Paths to Peace* gave eloquent testimony that young people do not have to be passive recipients of economics, politics, received ideas and identities. They can shape these things. They can build peace because they are willing and able to bridge differences. Building peace and prosperity means involving young people in areas like revitalising parliaments, political parties, policy-making, local governance. That is why, for instance, the Commonwealth involves young people in its election observer groups. Peace and prosperity have to be *constructed*, and this is why youth participation is so crucial. Give the young a voice and employment prospects, and they will be the single biggest drivers of peace. It is they who can build bridges between women and men; ethnic groups; immigrants and internally displaced persons; indigenous peoples; ex-combatants and victims.

Yet the proof of our pudding, of course, is in the eating – and in the practice of youth development work at large, and our youth and peace-building work in particular.

The Commonwealth Youth Programme, 34 years old this year, is one of the most esteemed features of the respected and unique Commonwealth brand. With just 50 people and a paltry budget of £2 million a year, it works wonders from four regional offices in the Caribbean (in Georgetown, Guyana), in Asia (in Chandigarh, India), in the Pacific (in Honiara in the Solomon Islands) and in Africa (in Lusaka, Zambia). The Chandigarh office is already designated a 'Centre of Excellence', with a focus on youth and local self-governance.

The Programme's achievements command respect: 8,000 youth businesses have been set up; £200,000 of loans disbursed. The Commonwealth Diploma in Youth Development Work is now on offer in 46 countries through the medium of 29 educational partners. 2,000 youth workers have been trained since 2006, and given the Commonwealth Youth Work Diploma. There are 500 Young 'Ambassadors for Positive Living' at work in Africa, Asia, Caribbean: brave young men and women - all HIV-positive - who counsel their peers about safe sex.

The Youth Development Indicators now being discussed at the UN-level are the brainchild of the Commonwealth. Indeed, much of our best youth policy and practice is taken up by others, especially the UN, the World Bank and the ILO. From bettering individuals' lives to bettering national approaches to the

challenges of young people: I am extremely gratified to be able to say that 45 out of 53 Commonwealth members have been helped by the Commonwealth Youth Programme to develop national youth strategies, or to set up and develop bodies such as national youth councils.

There is success to report, too, in using young people as agents of peace. Our new Commonwealth Youth Development Centre in Gulu, Northern Uganda, was built from the horror and trauma of young people caught in the crossfire of civil war. It offers its pupils peace training and peace dialogue. Vocational skills training, meanwhile, is targeting 4,000 people in skills such as farming, brick-laying, carpentry, tailoring. Similar activities are taking place in the Solomon Islands. Conflict resolution is so intrinsic to youth and community work that there is a module on conflict resolution in the Commonwealth Diploma taught to would-be youth workers.

What could be greater testimony to the potential of the Commonwealth's young people as peace-builders, than what we saw in Kenya earlier this year, where young people were so actively involved in volunteering to help at camps for Internally Displaced People. And in Sierra Leone last September, it was the Youth Alliance for Peace and Development which called for dialogue between political parties and a pulling back from the brink of violence.

The practical successes are here to see in Sri Lanka as well, which – for instance – has worked well with the Commonwealth Youth Credit Initiative, especially focussing it on young peoples' businesses devastated by the tsunami. This country's genuine internal tensions are amenable to be solved in the hearts, minds and actions of young people. University students and NGO activists are giving their perspectives on the source of conflict, lobbying political parties, running youth camps and exchanges, using performing arts for capacity building and awareness raising. I am aware, for instance, of how the 'Theatre of the People', with a largely young cast, travels the country – from Colombo to remote villages in Anuradhapura, Tangalle, Gampaha, Kurunegala – staging dramas in both Sinhala and Tamil. We will no doubt hear more in the course of the Meeting.

So what results can the two strands to the current Ministerial Meeting yield us?

In youth and peace-building, the challenge is to see isolated good practice become mainstream, measurable practice. We hope we can leave this Meeting with commitments, for instance, to:

- Train young people in good governance, human rights and democratic practice.
- Train young people in peace building, negotiation, mediation and conflict resolution – in school curricula, and in youth groups and civil society.
- Ensure that young people are fully informed of their human rights, and that they are able to exercise those rights freely.

- Involve young people in the monitoring and implementation of human rights instruments, and free and fair elections.
- Uphold the rights of young people in the criminal justice system.

Our wish-list would go further, into all of our youth work and in particular for the Commonwealth Youth Programme as it plots its strategic direction over the next four years. As from Tuesday, we will talk of priorities, budgets, and commitments. I think that the following six outcomes will be desirable.

First, refinements and improvements within the Commonwealth Youth Programme's three existing programme areas. In 'Youth Enterprise and Sustainable Livelihoods', we hope to see the Youth Credit Initiative spread to more countries, especially the Pacific. In 'Governance, Development and Youth Networks', it would be good to see our projects become even more participatory, using the very participation tools that we and UNICEF have devised. In 'Youth Work Education and Training', we hope that the Diploma programme can continue to expand, and that more public service commissions will formally recognise the qualification.

Second, our embracing the concept of our four regional centres becoming 'Centres of Excellence', based on the concept of applied and participatory research, and the underlying commitment to the idea that youth progress must be measured. The Asia/Chandigarh Centre is already becoming a Centre of Excellence in Youth and Local Self-Governance. The Government of India has met the cost, and the Centre should be up and running by June 2009. In the course of the Meeting we shall be reviewing other proposals: that the Africa/Gulu Centre will become a Centre of Excellence in peace-building; the Africa/Lusaka Centre in HIV/AIDS; the Caribbean/Georgetown Centre in Youth Work Education and Training; the Pacific/Honiara Centre in Youth-led research, knowledge gathering and information sharing. This is our vision of Commonwealth excellence and added value.

Third, it would be desirable to see Sport fully established as an integral part of the work of the Commonwealth Youth Programme. We value sport as a tool for building individuals and communities, harnessing young energies, breaking down barriers and reinforcing common humanity and interests. It is also a tool for development – especially in areas like public information and education, often on matters of health and especially sexual health. We have made major inroads in establishing a Commonwealth sporting community: now, the public spectacle of events like the Commonwealth Games need to translate into the local reality of Youth Ministries across the Commonwealth adopting specific sports policies to develop and empower youth. The Commonwealth Youth Games, next being held in Pune, India, conveniently marry the two themes of youth and sport.

Fourth, fifth and sixth, the three Ms: Money, Mainstreaming and Measurement.

Money: The Commonwealth Youth Programme budget in 1985 was £2.2 million. In 1995, it was £2.2 million. In 2005, it was £2.2 million. This represents not just a stagnation, but in effect a decline. It is why, at the last Heads of Government Meeting in Kampala in November, our Leaders committed themselves to moving towards an assessed, not a voluntary, financial contribution with effect from 2008/2009. This is exceptionally good news.

Mainstreaming: an awkward technical term, for a very simple idea, that Youth is no stand-alone activity, but that every aspect of government and community has a youth dimension which requires a youth policy and a youth budget. We fully acknowledge that the Commonwealth Secretariat has even further to go in ensuring the youth dimension in its political, economic, health, education, human rights and other programmes. Our new Strategic Plan 2008-2012 sees Youth – along with gender and human rights – as a cross-cutting issue to be systematically integrated. The Munyonyo Statement on Respect and Understanding, adopted by the leaders last November in Kampala, sees youth work – along with initiatives concerning women, media and education – as one of the key vehicles for building communities. Mainstreaming, of course, goes further, and needs to be part and parcel of the work of Commonwealth member governments. It is not enough just to have a youth ministry: what is needed is a youth policy in every ministry. We applaud the Commonwealth member states who are working in this direction.

And finally, Measurement. The Commonwealth's Youth Development Indicators are the world's only attempts to quantify progress in youth development work. It is an absolute requirement that we should be able to quantify – and thereby truly reflect on – our work. Let us continue to work with the UN and our member governments to establish global standards: refining, developing, *using* the Indicators we already have.

The tide is with us. Our constituents expect mighty things of us. They themselves are with us here in Colombo, with youth delegates sitting alongside their Ministers. All of us sensed the significance of the moment when, in Kampala, nine Heads of Government met eight highly impressive and articulate youth representatives, and each heard each other out.

The Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting and the Commonwealth Youth Programme constitute a living and growing network. Two of our Leaders at that Kampala Youth Dialogue have a special interest. Our youngest Commonwealth Prime Minister is Roosevelt Skerrit of Dominica, 36, a former Youth Minister himself. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi of Malaysia used to run youth programmes as a senior official and as Youth Minister. At 28, Emmalin Pierre, our Commonwealth youth representative from Grenada, was appointed Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office, with responsibility for Youth Development. At 27, Ahmed Mahloof, our Commonwealth youth representative from Maldives, became an MP.

Tomorrow quickly becomes today. The self-evident truth is a present reality: that young people are our future. The hope that they will find the key to the dilemmas of this Century, rests in them for the simple reason that it is they who will see through most of this Century. But the responsibility to empower, engage and encourage them as partners, so that they may be equal to this burden of expectation, rests collectively on all of us. It is my personal commitment – it is our personal commitment – to strive so that all young people are allowed all the fullness of life that the future can hold. **ENDS**