

First meeting of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on
Environment, 22 June 1993, United Nations, New York

Summary of Discussions and Main Conclusions

The Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment held its first meeting at a Ministerial level on 22 June 1993 at the United Nations in New York, on the eve of the high-level meeting of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). The meeting was chaired by Mr Kamal Nath, India's Minister for Environment and Forests. (A list of participants is at Annex I).

In his introductory remarks to the meeting, Mr William H. Montgomery (Assistant Secretary-General and Managing Director of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation) recalled the background to the establishment of the Consultative Group and the terms of reference for its work. He expressed the hope that the Group's discussions would enable its members to gain a better understanding of each other's positions and possibly identify common approaches they might pursue; generate some ideas which would assist the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Cyprus; and help to demonstrate the Commonwealth's value as a forum for dialogue which could strengthen international cooperation on environmental matters. (The full text of his remarks is at Annex II).

In his opening remarks, the Chairman expressed his gratitude to the Commonwealth Secretary-General for convening the Group's meeting. Its role, as he saw it, was to keep the political momentum of Rio going. The Commonwealth, cutting across divisions of geographic regions and economic interest groups, was as appropriate a forum as any to project the political determination of all, big and small, land-locked or island-developing, to push forward the Rio package. It was this spirit of Commonwealth cooperation which had encouraged India and the UK to formulate the Indo-UK environment initiative. On the basis of the somewhat unique relationship which they shared, member countries, even though they did not always look at every problem in the same light, constantly tried to identify points of commonality and to build upon them for a better world.

He observed that one of the most crucial issues before the CSD was national reporting. He believed that if these reports were to reflect efforts to follow up Agenda 21, they should also reflect the correct position as regards the flow of funds and the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, as well as convey information vital to decision-making. The visibility of the work of the CSD was another very important issue and he felt that it should relate to the constituencies Ministers served, namely, the citizens of their countries. He pointed out that one of the vital issues which touched the lives of all people was the availability of clean, safe drinking water. He hoped that when this issue came up for substantive consideration by the CSD

in 1994, governments would be in a position to give concrete shape to programmes and actions which would bring the goal of safe drinking water for all near completion in a time-bound fashion. He stressed that it would also be vitally important for the CSD to show the world that good intent was followed up with solid action in the two critical areas of financial resources and technology transfer. He urged Commonwealth countries to intensify cooperation to take forward these goals to the maximum extent possible.

The Chairman invited all the Group's members to speak, particularly on issues that concerned them deeply, noting that their exchange of views would help smoothen the path to the success of the CSD's first session.

The Group had a wide-ranging discussion and exchange of views on Commonwealth concerns in relation to the CSD's agenda and work; specific cross-sectoral and sectoral issues; and Commonwealth and wider international cooperation on environmental matters.

Several members pointed to the value of Commonwealth consultations on environmental matters. Although their countries had different views on some issues, they also shared much in common. Networking and dialogue would help to build confidence and trust, sensitise countries to each other's problems and concerns, and facilitate the sharing of experience in a number of areas. It was pointed out that one such area was women and the environment, which was the main theme of the meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs in Cyprus in July.

Various speakers stressed the need for Ministers to give a high profile and clear policy directions to the CSD in order to enable the body to carry out its work in the most effective manner possible. They emphasised the importance of maintaining the political momentum of the process UNCED had initiated and operationalising the commitments which had been made in Rio de Janeiro. Some noted that it was important for the CSD's work to relate closely to national priorities and agendas for action. It was noted that many elements of the Indo-British initiative on the environment had been reflected in the CSD's discussions and documentation.

Some members provided information on the actions their governments had taken to integrate environmental and economic policies and develop national sustainable development plans. They emphasised the value of sharing experiences in these areas, as well as exchanging information on "best practices" in areas such as environmental management and assessment, environmental legislation, and eco-tourism. Several underlined the importance of the provision and exchange of information on national implementation of Agenda 21. Some felt that it would be desirable to develop a broad framework, rather than a rigid format, for the provision and collation of such information, bearing in mind that many developing countries lacked the necessary capacities to prepare detailed national reports. It was suggested that information could be provided and presented on

a regional or sub-regional basis, and that in smaller countries, such information was essential to identify capacity-building requirements. In this context, some members emphasised the importance of regional and sub-regional cooperation on environmental matters.

Certain speakers indicated that their governments were assigning a high priority to the conservation and sustainable development of their forest resources, and emphasised the importance of community participation in forestry and other environmental projects. It was pointed out that the Iwokrama Rain Forest Programme in Guyana, which had been launched under the Commonwealth's auspices, stood out as a model for international cooperation for sustainable development. It was suggested that in their national reports, countries might include information on their activities in the forestry sector.

Many members emphasised the importance of promoting greater environmental awareness through education and training and provided information on specific initiatives and actions their countries had taken. They noted that the Commonwealth, with its traditions of cooperation in the field of education, was well placed to take a lead in environmental education. The specific suggestion was made that Commonwealth countries might consider strengthening cooperation in this area, working through institutions such as the Commonwealth of Learning, based in Canada. It was also suggested that member countries could be invited to provide information on successful projects (both in this area and in others) which could then be disseminated to other countries by the Commonwealth Secretariat. It was noted that the Langkawi Awards Programme for Environmental Studies, funded by Canada and administered by the Secretariat, was a good example of cooperation in environmental education and training.

On the question of financial resources to implement UNCED's decisions, it was pointed out that while the need for new and additional resources was widely accepted, donors were unlikely to go beyond the commitments they had indicated thus far. Greater emphasis would therefore need to be given to securing more effective utilisation of existing financial resources. Many members felt that while this was important, it could not be a substitute for new and additional resources. They noted that post-UNCED developments in regard to financial commitments and flows had been disappointing. In many developing countries, existing resources were already stretched and could not be diverted towards environmental protection at the expense of economic growth and the survival needs of poor people. They stressed the political urgency of realising the commitments made at Rio in respect of ODA targets, debt relief, and international trade, in order to maximise flows of new and additional resources to developing countries.

Many members also emphasised the urgency of realising the commitments made at Rio in respect of the transfer of environmentally sound technologies (ESTs) to, and capacity-building in, developing countries. They noted that since the costs of many ESTs were high, developing countries would need financial assistance to buy them. Their countries also needed

assistance in developing local know-how and related skills. Some members stressed the importance of choosing appropriate ESTs and adapting them to local needs and to cultural and other national circumstances. The specific suggestion was made that consideration be given to establishing a Commonwealth fund to promote technology cooperation and facilitate the transfer of ESTs to Commonwealth developing countries on concessional terms.

Some members pointed out that consumption patterns were a critical element of sustainability, and emphasised the need for all countries, especially developed ones, to make their patterns of consumption and production environmentally sustainable. The importance of demographic factors was also noted in this context.

Some members drew attention to the specific vulnerabilities of smaller countries and the importance they attached to a successful outcome at the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, to be held in Barbados in 1994. Preparations for the Conference were underway but there was a need to mobilise adequate support for the process, particularly from the larger developed countries. The hope was expressed that the Commonwealth, with its tradition of highlighting the concerns of its smaller member countries, would play an active and meaningful role in support of the 1994 Conference. The Group noted that the Prime Minister of Barbados intended to raise this issue at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Cyprus. It was also observed that Guyana's presidency of the UN General Assembly in 1993 might provide an opportunity for the Commonwealth to pursue joint initiatives on environmental and other matters. The Group was informed about the activities the Commonwealth Secretariat was undertaking to assist Commonwealth small states in the Caribbean/Mediterranean region with their technical preparations for the 1994 Conference.

On the question of UNCED follow-up within the UN system, some members emphasised the importance of getting maximum mileage out of existing financial and organisational resources, strengthening capacities, and harmonising the activities and roles of the relevant UN agencies and organisations.

In his summation at the end of the meeting, the Chairman proposed that the following conclusions, in particular, could be flagged for the attention of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Cyprus:

- * The need to give the CSD's work and role a high political profile on the international agenda.
- * The need for the commitments made at Rio de Janeiro to be operationalised with a sense of urgency.
- * The need for the Commonwealth to play an active role in highlighting the concerns of smaller countries and promoting a successful outcome to the 1994 Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.

The Group agreed with the Chairman's suggestion that it should meet again in the wings of the next major international

conference on environmental matters involving Ministerial-level participation.

It was decided that the Secretariat would prepare a summary record of the meeting's discussions which, with the agreement of the Chairman, would be brought to the attention of Commonwealth governments in an appropriate way by the Commonwealth Secretary-General.

Participants at the First Meeting of the Commonwealth
Consultative Group on Environment, 22 June 1993
United Nations, New York

Members of the Group

Antigua and Barbuda

Mr Lionel Hurst
Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN, New York

Australia

Ms Ros Kelly
Minister for the Environment, Sports and Territories

Barbados

Mr L.H. Lewis
Acting Minister of Labour, Consumer Affairs and the Environment

Britain

Mr Derek Osborn
Deputy Secretary, Department of the Environment

Canada

Ms Mary Collins
Minister of State for the Environment

Guyana

Mr S.R. Insanally
Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN, New York

India

Mr Kamal Nath (Chairman)
Minister for Environment and Forests

Malawi

Dr E.Y. Sambo
Minister of Forestry and Natural Resources

Malaysia

Datuk Law Hieng Ding
Minister of Science, Technology, and Environment

Maldives

Mr Hussain Shihab
Director of Environmental Affairs
Ministry of Planning and Environment

Malta

Ms Simone Borg
Officer in Charge
International Environmental Affairs Department
Ministry for the Environment

Namibia

Mr N. Bessinger
Minister of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism

Nigeria

Dr.E.O.A. Aina
Chief Executive
Federal Environmental Protection Agency

Pakistan

Mr Munir Akram
Additional Foreign Secretary
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Singapore

Mr Mark Hong
Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, New York

Sri Lanka

Dr Wimal Wickremasinghe
Minister of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs

Vanuatu

Mr R.F. Van Lierop
Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN, New York

Western Samoa

Mr S.Sesega
Principal Environment Officer
Department of Lands and Environment

(Note: Bangladesh and Kiribati were unable to be represented)

Other Commonwealth countries represented by Ministers

Zimbabwe

Dr H.M. Murerwa
Minister of Environment and Tourism

ANNEX II

Introductory Remarks by Mr William H. Montgomery, Commonwealth Assistant Secretary-General, to the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment, 22 June 1993, New York

Mr Chairman, Ministers and Excellencies.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this inaugural meeting of the Consultative Group. The Secretary-General has asked me to convey his apologies for being unable to join you here, but he had made an important commitment to other Commonwealth business before the date of the CSD meeting was known. As you all know, he believes that your Group can make a useful contribution to effective follow-up to UNCED, and impart greater coherence to the Commonwealth's role in the environmental field, focusing on those areas where it has a comparative advantage.

We are most grateful to you, Minister Nath, for chairing this important meeting, literally minutes after your arrival in New York. With your permission, I will make a few introductory remarks before you take over our proceedings.

The idea that the Commonwealth should have a mechanism for consultations on environmental matters was originally proposed by Canada, and discussed at the Commonwealth Senior Officials Meeting in Kampala in 1992. The Secretary-General was subsequently asked to establish a Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment by the Commonwealth Steering Committee of Senior Officials at its first meeting in London in April. The Committee considered that consultations among member countries in the wings of appropriate international meetings could usefully contribute to the follow-up to UNCED. Since this meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development is crucial to launching that follow-up process, the Secretary-General thought it the most appropriate occasion to convene your first meeting.

The Consultative Group's terms of reference, which were set out in the Secretary-General's letter of 13 May to all Commonwealth governments, are to:

- * provide a forum for high-level exchange of views on environmental issues which are of particular concern to member countries;
- * exchange views and experiences at national and regional levels in planning for environmentally sustainable development;

- * develop proposals for more effective Commonwealth action in priority areas, within the frameworks of the 1989 Langkawi Declaration and programme of action on environment, and the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration;
- * contribute to the post-UNCED process by facilitating informal discussions on critical environment and development issues on which the Commonwealth could contribute to the development of an international consensus; and
- * provide strategic guidance to the Commonwealth Secretariat's work programme on the environment.

Since this is your first meeting, the Commonwealth Secretariat did not want to burden you with too many documents. You will I hope have received annotations to the provisional agenda which accompanied the Secretary-General's message of 8 June. A brief note which provides an overview of the strategic orientations of the Secretariat's on-going and planned work in the field of the environment has been placed before you. The annotated agenda flags certain issues to which you may wish to give particular attention in your deliberations. I must emphasise, however, that our intention was not to seek to confine your discussions to those issues. We realise that there may be others which you may also want to take up.

We hope that your exchange of views this afternoon will enable you to gain a better understanding of each other's positions and possibly to identify common approaches you might pursue during the next two days to make the CSD an effective and dynamic mechanism for UNCED follow-up. We also hope that your discussions today can generate some ideas on the environment which will assist Commonwealth Heads of Government when they meet later this year in Cyprus. But above all, we hope that this Group will help demonstrate the Commonwealth's value as a forum for dialogue which can serve to strengthen international cooperation on environmental matters.

Since time is short, I will now give the floor to your Chairman, Mr Kamal Nath.

Thank you.

Opening Remarks by Mr Kamal Nath, India's Minister for Environment and Forests, to the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment, 22 June 1993, New York

Friends.

I would like to welcome you all to this gathering and express my gratitude to the Secretary-General for taking this initiative. Some of us met in Nairobi last month during the UNEP Governing Council Session, and our mutual consultations, I feel, contributed to the success of the Governing Council meeting. But we are now meeting in the more formal framework of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment. I hope that this meeting, on the eve of the CSD, will prove equally useful. I feel privileged that the Secretary-General has asked me to chair our deliberations.

In the CSD we are at a stage when major institutional mechanisms are being put in place. The commitments made at Rio and progress towards the realisation of those goals and objectives must be promoted and monitored by the CSD. The various regional and interest groups are articulating positions and reaching agreements on the items under discussion on the CSD's agenda, which also figure on our agenda today.

What then, the skeptics may ask, is the role of this meeting of a group of Commonwealth Environment Ministers? For me, the answer is simple. Ministers are here to keep the political momentum of Rio going. The Commonwealth, cutting across divisions of geographic regions and economic interest groups, is as appropriate a forum as any to project the political determination of all, big and small, land-locked or island-developing, to push forward the Rio package. This is the spirit of Commonwealth cooperation. It was this spirit which first encouraged India and the UK to formulate the Indo-UK environment initiative. We were happy that it received broad endorsement. Based on the somewhat unique relationship which Commonwealth countries share with each other, even though member countries may not always look at every problem in the same light, we constantly try to identify points of commonality, and build upon these for a better world.

One of the most crucial questions before the CSD, for example, is the issue of national reporting. If these reports are to reflect the effort to follow up Agenda 21, then they must also reflect the correct position as regards the flow of funds and the transfer of environmentally sound technologies. Furthermore, the effort should be on conveying information vital to decision-making, and not so copious and voluminous that the effort is counter-productive.

The question of the visibility of the work that the CSD is doing is a very important one. We must be able to relate to the constituencies we serve - the people of our countries. One of the vital issues which touch the lives of all our peoples is the

availability of clean, safe drinking water. This issue will come up for substantive consideration at the second session next year. By then, we should be in a position to give concrete shape to programmes and actions which will bring the goal of safe drinking water for all near completion in a time-bound fashion.

The central issue of financial resources and technology transfer will be discussed regularly both in the thematic context as well as in the larger cooperation context. Once again it will be vitally important for the CSD to show the world that good intention is followed up with solid action in these two critical areas. Commonwealth countries must intensify cooperation bilaterally to take forward these goals to the maximum extent possible.

Many of us here have other affiliations too, and belong to various regional groups, but I believe that far from coming in the way of our mutual commitment to the protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development, our other friendships would enhance our efforts here. These are issues of the first importance and if the Commonwealth as a group is to retain its ability to influence decisions, it must concern itself with these vital questions.

I would not like to say anything more at this stage, except to point out that, in keeping with our informal method of working and bearing in mind the constraints of time, we shall not be having formal country statements, nor adopting formal resolutions. I would, however, invite everyone to speak, particularly on issues that concern them deeply. This exchange of views would in itself go a long way in smoothing the path to the success of the first CSD session, as it has reached its culmination, with many issues still to be resolved.

Thank you.