



COMMONWEALTH INFORMATION

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**Statement by the
Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General (Economic and Social Affairs)
the Hon Sir Humphrey Maud**

**to the Committee of the Whole,
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Commonwealth Secretariat, Marlborough House,
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I welcome the opportunity to address this Committee on behalf of the Commonwealth, whose Secretariat serves an organisation of 53 members representing more than a quarter of all humanity. Making development environmentally sustainable and promoting the full implementation of the Rio agreements has been a high priority for successive meetings of Commonwealth Heads of Government. It will be again when they meet in Edinburgh this October.

The Rio conference marked the world's recognition that our planet was in peril and that governments and peoples had to work together for its survival. Since then, the record has been mixed. There have been positive developments: new agreements on environment and development have been concluded, many countries have developed national sustainable development strategies, and the link between environment and economic development is increasingly recognised and applied by policy-makers. However, if a global environment and development audit were to be carried out today, it would reveal a large agenda of unfinished business. In some areas, we have gone backwards. In others, progress has been agonisingly slow when measured against earlier expectations. So it is good that we should be meeting this week to take stock and plot the way forward.

We must all agree that progress in making a transition to environmentally sustainable patterns of energy consumption and production has been particularly disappointing. It is therefore not surprising that emissions of carbon dioxide have increased, casting serious doubts on our ability to meet the initial objective of the Rio Convention on Climate Change. With mounting scientific evidence on the impact of human activities on the world's climate, the need for substantial reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases grows more urgent. This is an issue of great concern to the Commonwealth, since several of its members are small islands and low-lying states who would be the front-line victims of climate change and rising sea-levels.

The Commonwealth is a uniquely diverse association. Its members include industrialised as well as some of the poorest countries in the world. Small states with populations of less than a million, who are particularly vulnerable to environmental threats and economic shocks, make up more than half our members. Environmental problems confronting Commonwealth countries are wide-ranging — from concerns about air pollution and the management of hazardous wastes to sea-level rise, deforestation, land degradation and dwindling fish stocks. Arguably, this rich diversity of circumstance and experience is a source of strength. Our practice of sharing experience and examining practical proposals for joint action in a spirit of consensus has not only helped our members but also brought new insights on the global agenda.

The Commonwealth's use and practice of consensus-building was one of the three pillars underpinning the Millbrook Action Programme agreed by Heads of Government in New Zealand in 1995. This programme emphasised how the Commonwealth's diversity and global reach placed it in a good position to assist the international community by building consensus on difficult issues. For instance, joint initiatives by Commonwealth countries helped pave the way for a successful review of forestry issues at the 1995 session of the Commission on Sustainable Development. (CSD). Proposals made by Commonwealth Finance Ministers in recent years have helped to spur the Bretton Woods Institutions to tackle the problems of

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries, whose ability to meet the obligations assumed at Rio has also been aggravated by their debt-burden and falling aid flows. Commonwealth Environment Ministers, who meet regularly in the wings of the CSD, have helped to strengthen co-operation on major issues such as the sustainable management of forests and fisheries. They will be meeting this afternoon to discuss priorities for further collective action by the Commonwealth to carry forward the Rio agenda.

There is an urgent need for action on the ground which gives concrete meaning to sustainable development. This is particularly so in relation to forests, an asset which is increasingly imperilled in so many Commonwealth countries. Five years after Rio, the Iwokrama International Rain Forest Programme in Guyana has been launched under the Commonwealth's auspices. It addresses directly the issues of forests, biodiversity and climate change, which were at the centre of the debate in Rio. This initiative was made possible by Guyana's generous decision in 1989 to set aside almost a million acres of its rain forest. Half of this is being preserved to improve scientific knowledge of biodiversity. The remainder will be exploited to provide economic benefits in an environmentally sound manner. Indigenous communities living near the forest are full partners in this enterprise. Model forms of collaboration with the private sector are being developed. Iwokrama's unique juxtaposition of environmental conservation with development will show how a country richly endowed with natural resources can both preserve them as a contribution to the global commons and derive income from them. This will help Guyana, the rest of the Commonwealth and the global community.

A Donor Group has been formed to support the Iwokrama Programme. We hope that all those with interests in the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable forest management will join the Group so that the Programme's rich potential can be realised for global benefit.

I will not take up your time by spelling out in detail the many Commonwealth programmes being conducted by member countries and by the Secretariat to promote good environmental practice across our association. I would merely stress that the Commonwealth stands ready to deploy its capacity for generating consensus across the whole global agenda for the environment, as a way of promoting and facilitating the necessary action we all have to take.

For instance, the Commonwealth's richly diverse membership and the practice of consensus building between its members can certainly make a contribution to promoting faster progress at Kyoto on climate change; on bringing new focus to the integration of economic and environmental policies; and to the search for innovative means of generating greater and more secure flows of assistance to developing countries, both from bilateral programmes and from such sources as IDA and the Global Environment Facility. Specifically, the Commonwealth's programmes directed at capacity building in developing countries and the transfer of the technology they need represent an indispensable concomitant to further progress on the Rio agenda. Commonwealth Environment Ministers will be looking at the detail of such assistance this afternoon — where, as usual, they will expect to find the devil!

I believe there is one central contribution the Commonwealth can make to enable the targets which we hope will be agreed this week to be achieved. This is in the perception that it is essential that every country be able to assess the impact on its environment not only of its own economic policies but of the global forces that threaten our planet. Every country must