

**Sixth Meeting of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment  
20 April 1999, United Nations, New York<sup>1</sup>**

**SUMMARY RECORD**

*Agenda Item 1: Opening of Meeting*

The Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Dame Veronica Sutherland, opened the Meeting with the following remarks:

“I welcome you all to this Commonwealth meeting and extend especially warm greetings to those of you who, as I am, are participating in the work of the Consultative Group for the first time. I succeeded Sir Humphrey Maud as Deputy Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs when he retired at the end of January this year. I look forward to working with you to make this a fruitful meeting. The Secretary-General has asked me to convey his best wishes for a successful outcome.

“I would like to express my particular appreciation to the Honourable Minister of Environment of the Republic of Maldives, Mr Ismail Shafeeu, for agreeing to chair this meeting at such short notice. As the time we have for discussion is limited, I will make some brief opening remarks, with your permission Minister, before I hand over to you.

“The main theme which we will discuss under Provisional Agenda Item 3 is extremely important for the Commonwealth, more than half of whose members are small states. There is a substantial agenda of key issues and problems affecting these countries, several of whom are present today, that must be addressed in the UN General Assembly Special Session’s review of the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action. Many of these issues and problems are being considered by the Commonwealth-World Bank Joint Task Force on Small States, which is a major practical initiative by the Commonwealth to encourage the international financial institutions and other multilateral organisations to take account of the vulnerability of small states in designing programmes to support their sustainable development.

“During the past five years, some progress has been made in laying the foundation for sustainable development in small states. But the international community must acknowledge that some of the adverse impacts of the globalisation of trade and finance, combined with exposure to persistent environmental threats, have made many small states more vulnerable and created additional constraints to their transition to sustainable development. The challenge, therefore, is to find ways of reducing vulnerability and mitigating these constraints. The Secretariat’s background paper, CCGE(99)1, is intended to assist this meeting to address this challenge and think in terms of a strategy for action that the Commonwealth could promote during the preparatory work of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and at the UN General Assembly’s Special Session (UNGASS) in September.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of participants in the Meeting is at Annex I

“In order to enable the Commonwealth’s collective voice to be heard at the CSD, I propose that a summary statement by the Chair be circulated after this meeting and presented to the CSD’s high-level segment on Friday morning, when it discusses the review of the Barbados Programme. This has been the practice since 1997 and I hope the Group will wish to see it continued.

“Under Item 4 of the Provisional Agenda, you will have an opportunity to focus on the adequacy of international mechanisms for post-disaster relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. At their meeting last year, Commonwealth Senior Officials expressed concern about the adequacy of these mechanisms and considered a proposal by Bangladesh for the establishment of a Commonwealth disaster-relief fund. Senior Officials requested the Secretariat, in this context, to examine existing mechanisms in the wider international community and to report to Commonwealth Environment Ministers, Finance Ministers and Heads of Government in 1999. The Secretariat’s report, CCGE(99)2, reviews existing mechanisms for disaster relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction and sets out some conclusions and recommendations for your consideration. The outcome of the CCGE’s discussions on this subject will be conveyed to Commonwealth Finance Ministers when they discuss the Secretariat’s report at their meeting in September later this year.

“Before I conclude my remarks, I would like to draw your attention to a major international initiative the Commonwealth Secretary-General has been associated with, which has recently come to fruition. The Secretary-General is a member of the independent World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development - a body established along the lines of the 1987 Brundtland Commission - that has completed an extensive three-year review of global forest problems. Its final Report, “Our Forests, Our Future”, had its first official launch yesterday in Washington DC. Further presentations of the Report are to be held in other countries in the following months, including Canada and Guyana. The Commissioners have made several bold and innovative recommendations to improve forest management globally, focusing mainly on: the need for political commitment; public participation; community forestry; integration of economic and environmental values; forest stewardship with the private sector; poverty alleviation; and building institutions to support sustainable forest management. I am sure there will be great interest in the Commission’s Report across the Commonwealth.

“It is with pleasure that I now give the floor to our Chairman, Minister Ismail Shafeeu”.

The Chairman, the Honourable Ismail Shafeeu, Minister of Environment of the Republic of Maldives, said he considered it both a privilege and an honour to be chairing the sixth Meeting of the CCGE. He suggested that the Meeting’s deliberations be kept as informal as possible and urged delegates to be brief in their interventions in order to enable all who wished to speak on any agenda item to do so.

### ***Agenda Item 2: Adoption of the Agenda***

The Meeting adopted the provisional agenda set out in the Secretariat's Note, CCGE(99)2(Admin), without revision.

***Agenda Item 3: Overcoming Vulnerability and Accelerating Sustainable Development in Small States***

The Chairman invited debate on Item 3, the special theme of the Meeting, and suggested that the action points set out in the Executive Summary of the Secretariat's paper, CCGE(99)1, could provide a useful basis for the CCGE's discussions.

Many participants expressed concern that some of the adverse impacts of globalisation, combined with exposure to persistent environmental threats, had made many small states more vulnerable and created additional constraints to their transition to sustainable development. There was general agreement that a number of problems affecting small states needed to be addressed in the UNGASS review of the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action, and that the Commonwealth was particularly well placed to articulate the concerns of small states in preparations for the review as well as promote consensus on actions to address these concerns. Some participants stressed that the UNGASS should ensure that all commitments made at the Barbados Conference were upheld.

The Commonwealth-World Bank Joint Task Force was widely welcomed as a concrete and practical initiative to address small states' problems, as was the Commonwealth's work on a composite index of vulnerability, which was commended for its strong empirical foundations. The special initiative of the World Bank to strengthen its programmes of assistance to small states was also welcomed. All international financial institutions and development organisations were urged to take account of vulnerability in their programmes of assistance to these countries.

Many participants pointed out that the criterion of per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was too narrow to determine the economic status and development assistance requirements of small states. It ignored vulnerability and structural constraints faced by these countries such as the lack of economic diversification, the absence of scale economies and relatively higher per capita costs of infrastructure (e.g. airports and roads). They emphasised the need for the flexible use of a broader set of criteria, including vulnerability indicators, and suggested that the Commonwealth's Vulnerability Index could serve as a useful operational tool in this context.

Several speakers expressed strong support for a moratorium on decisions to graduate countries out of the status of Least Developed Countries at the UN until a sound methodology, that took account of vulnerability, was developed to guide such decisions. One speaker said his country, as a member of the UN's Economic and Social Council, had been active in providing guidance on this issue to the UN's Committee on Development Policy (CDP), and therefore welcomed the discussions the Secretariat had also had with the CDP on the subject.

On issues related to trade and sustainable development, concern was expressed that many small states had been unable to benefit from globalisation and trade liberalisation and were experiencing great difficulties in adjusting to new trade regimes in the international trading system. It was noted that if certain rulings of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) deprived small states of markets for their major exports (e.g. bananas), this would have a disastrous impact on their development. Several participants pointed out that small states needed longer periods of adjustment and assistance to meet transitional costs. They called for the WTO to extend its application of special and differential treatment to the more vulnerable small states, as well as to give greater recognition to these countries' concerns at WTO Ministerial meetings. It was also noted that the WTO could help small states by streamlining procedures for their accession, reducing their membership fees and facilitating their use of its costly Dispute Settlement Mechanism.

Many speakers underscored the need to mitigate serious environmental threats to small states, especially climate change and sea-level rise caused by global warming. It was noted that the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change needed to enter into force as soon as possible. Some participants felt the Commonwealth could play a useful role in assisting vulnerable small states to develop plans for adapting to climate change and sea-level rise at national, sub-regional and regional levels. Other priority areas identified by participants included: the need for creative solutions to the problems of waste management; protecting the marine environment; environmentally and socially sustainable tourism; and reducing the potential threats posed by the shipment of nuclear wastes. One speaker noted that in March 1999, Caribbean Heads of Government had expressed their "outrage" that the Caribbean Sea was being used for shipments of dangerous nuclear waste by certain industrial countries. These shipments posed a clear and present danger to Caribbean small states. His country therefore firmly believed this matter should be addressed in the UN's discussions.

Some speakers noted that one important area where international assistance provided under the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action had been inadequate, was support for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed by natural disasters in vulnerable small states. They stressed the importance of giving greater priority to the needs of these countries in the review of the Programme.

Many participants felt a high priority should continue to be given to building capacity in small states for more effective economic and environmental management and planning. It was suggested that a coherent and properly co-ordinated strategy was needed to support human resource development and institutional strengthening in those countries that continued to lack a critical mass of expertise. Several speakers welcomed the assistance provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat for the implementation of the Barbados Programme in small member states, and encouraged the Secretariat to maintain and strengthen its assistance to these countries.

In bringing the Meeting's discussions on Agenda Item 3 to a close, the Chairman observed that a number of important conclusions and proposals had emerged which the

Commonwealth could usefully promote in the CSD's preparations for the review of the Barbados Programme.

***Agenda Item 4: Adequacy of International Mechanisms for Disaster Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction***

The Chairman invited participants to speak on this agenda item, drawing their attention to the conclusions and recommendations of the Secretariat's background paper, CCGE(99)2.

There was broad support among participants for the conclusions and recommendations of the Secretariat's paper. One speaker pointed out that in terms of vulnerability to natural disasters, her country was the second most vulnerable country in the Commonwealth. Because of its sad and long experience of a succession of natural disasters, including recent floods that had caused havoc and widespread damage in the country, it had proposed at the 1998 Commonwealth Senior Officials Meeting that the possibility of establishing a Commonwealth Disaster-Relief Fund be examined.

Her country had since concluded that it would be better to re-inforce existing international mechanisms for post-disaster relief and rehabilitation rather than create new ones. It supported the Secretariat's paper's recommendations for promoting arrangements for public-private partnerships in risk-sharing; strengthening disaster preparedness and mitigation; improving the speed and effectiveness of response to natural disasters; and improving international co-ordination of disaster-related assistance. It also hoped that the trend of declining donor support for post-natural disaster humanitarian assistance would be reversed.

Another speaker said that, while his country supported the Secretariat's recommendations for improving existing mechanisms as well as the World Bank's efforts to promote public-private partnerships, it continued to be of the view that there remained a need for an International Fund - rather than a mechanism confined to the Commonwealth - which all vulnerable countries could access to finance the immediate reconstruction and rehabilitation of infrastructure in the event of natural disasters. He recalled that his Prime Minister had originally raised this idea at the 1997 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Edinburgh in the wake of Hurricane Luis which, in 1995, had wiped out one year of the country's GDP in 36 hours and caused damage amounting to \$500 million. The country had been forced to borrow money on commercial terms for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure which had placed an additional burden on the economy.

He pointed out that although existing mechanisms might be considered adequate for the purpose of relieving immediate human suffering after a natural disaster, they were woefully inadequate for reconstruction and rehabilitation. His country envisaged that a new

International Fund, with contributions from donors as well as disaster-prone countries, could operate as a window of the World Bank, with the ability to provide funds to regional institutions. He expressed the hope that the idea of an International Disaster Fund would therefore remain on the Commonwealth's agenda.

Other speakers highlighted the particular difficulties small states experienced in coping with the impacts of natural disasters.

***Agenda Item 4: Any Other Business***

The Chairman enquired whether participants wished to raise any other matters.

One participant said that since the problem of climate change and sea-level rise continued to be a major concern of the Commonwealth, his Government proposed to be in touch with the Secretariat after the CCGE meeting in order to explore how this subject might be addressed at the 1999 CHOGM in South Africa. Another participant observed that it would be useful for each meeting of the CCGE to receive a brief report from the Secretariat on action taken to follow-up the conclusions of the previous meeting.

The Chairman thanked participants for their contributions. He thanked the Secretariat for the preparations it had undertaken for the Meeting and expressed particular appreciation for the guidance and support he had received from Dame Veronica Sutherland. He noted that since there appeared to be general support for continuing the practice of having a Summary Statement by the Chairman, which would capture the main conclusions of the CCGE's discussions, this would be prepared and distributed at the UN after the Meeting. He said he also proposed to refer to the conclusions of the CCGE Meeting in his intervention during the CSD high-level segment's discussions on the review of the Barbados Programme. (The text of the Chairman's Summary Statement is at Annex II.)

A vote of thanks was given to the Chairman.

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**List of Participants**

***Antigua and Barbuda***

The Hon Molwyn Joseph  
Minister for Planning, Implementation  
and Environment

Mr Ron Sanders  
High Commissioner  
High Commission of Antigua and Barbuda  
London, UK

***Australia***

Senator the Hon Robert Hill  
Minister for the Environment and Heritage

Mr Howard Bamsey  
Deputy Secretary  
Environment Australia

***Bangladesh***

The Hon Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury  
Minister for Environment and Forests

Mr Kamal Abdul Naser Chowdhury  
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***Barbados***

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***Maldives***

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***Malta***

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Ms Alda Salomão  
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***Solomon Islands***

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***South Africa***

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## ***Zambia***

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## ***Commonwealth Secretariat***

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*Chairman's Summary Statement*

Commonwealth Environment Ministers met on 20 April 1999 in New York for the sixth meeting of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment, convened in the wings of the high-level segment of the 1999 session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. The Meeting was chaired by the Honourable Ismail Shafeeu, Minister of Home Affairs, Housing and Environment of the Republic of Maldives. Its main theme was overcoming vulnerability and accelerating the sustainable development of small states.

Ministers expressed concern that some of the adverse impacts of the globalisation of trade and finance, combined with exposure to persistent environmental threats, had made many small states more vulnerable and created additional constraints to their transition to sustainable development. They agreed there was a substantial agenda of key issues and problems affecting small states that needed to be addressed in the UN General Assembly's Special Session's (UNGASS) review, in September 1999, of the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. Ministers welcomed the establishment of the Commonwealth-World Bank Joint Task Force as a concrete and practical initiative to address these issues and problems, and commended the Commonwealth's work on a composite index of vulnerability. They also welcomed a special initiative of the World Bank to strengthen its programmes of assistance for small states, based on a strategic assessment of their needs.

Ministers agreed that a high priority should be given to promoting consensus in preparations for the UNGASS on the following actions, in particular, in order to accelerate the sustainable development of small states within the framework of the Barbados Programme:

- Multilateral, regional and bilateral development organisations should take account of vulnerability in the design of their programmes of assistance for small states. A set of criteria broader than Gross Domestic Product per capita, including explicit vulnerability indicators, should be applied flexibly to determine the economic status and development assistance requirements of small states. In this context, the Commonwealth's Vulnerability Index, which has been refined by the Commonwealth-World Bank Joint Task Force, could serve as a useful operational tool. It should be published and disseminated widely prior to the UNGASS.
- There should be a moratorium on decisions to graduate countries out of the status of Least Developed Countries at the UN, until a sound and robust methodology - which includes indicators of vulnerability - is developed to guide such decisions.

- Longer transition periods and financing mechanisms are needed for small states to adjust to new trade regimes in the international trading system and meet transitional costs. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) and its membership should be encouraged to extend its application of special and differential treatment to the more vulnerable small states. The WTO can also help small states by streamlining procedures for their accession; reducing their membership fees; and facilitating their use of its costly Dispute Settlement Mechanism. The concerns of vulnerable small states should be given greater recognition at the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Seattle later this year.
- Serious environmental threats should be mitigated. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change must enter into force as soon as possible. Vulnerable small states need urgent assistance in developing and implementing plans for adapting to climate change and sea-level rise at national, sub-regional and regional levels. Other priority areas include: developing effective policies for management of wastes; reducing potential threats posed by the shipment of nuclear wastes in the seas surrounding small islands; protecting the marine environment from pollution from various sources; and making tourism development environmentally sound and socially sensitive.
- All institutions presently involved in supporting capacity building in small states, need to develop a coherent and properly co-ordinated strategy to support human resource development and institutional strengthening in those countries that continue to lack a critical mass of indigenous expertise and institutions in key areas of economic and environmental management and planning.
- Existing international mechanisms for the provision of assistance to meet pre-disaster and post-disaster requirements of vulnerable countries should be strengthened, with consideration given to the creation of new windows in international financial institutions to provide financing, that is both adequate and timely, for disaster preparedness and post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation of infrastructure. Partnerships should be developed with the private sector to implement schemes that spread risks, reduce insurance premiums, expand insurance coverage and increase financing for post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation.

Ministers welcomed the support provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat for the implementation of various elements of the 1994 Barbados Programme in small member states, noting the importance of existing activities in the areas of capacity building and improving the integration of economic and environmental policies. They encouraged the Secretariat to maintain and strengthen its assistance for small states, ensuring that such assistance continues to respond to the sustainable development priorities of these countries.

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