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**Promoting Environmentally Sustainable Development: An Overview of  
the Commonwealth Secretariat's Activities since Rio**

**Background Note by the Commonwealth Secretariat**

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**CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
Introduction	1
International Co-operation to Accelerate Sustainable Development in Developing Countries and Related Domestic Policies	1
Combating Poverty	2
Protecting and Promoting Human Health	2
Integrating Environment and Development in Economic Decision-Making	2
Protection of the Atmosphere	3
Sustainable Forest Management	3
Promoting Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development	4
Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity	4
Protection of Oceans, Seas, Coastal Areas and Living Marine Resources	5
Sustainable Development of Small States	6
Protection of the Quality and Supply of Freshwater Resources	6
Environmentally Sound Management of Hazardous Wastes	6
Major Groups	7
Transfer of Environmentally Sound Technology	8
Science for Sustainable Development	8
Capacity Building in Developing Countries	8
International Legal Instruments and Mechanisms	9
Conclusions	9

## **Introduction**

At their meeting in Cyprus in 1993, a year after the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, Commonwealth Heads of Government reaffirmed the high priority they attached to the pursuit of environmentally sustainable development, and stressed the need for the Rio commitments to be translated urgently into action. In New Zealand in 1995, Commonwealth leaders concluded that the Commonwealth should focus on those aspects of the international sustainable development agenda where it has a comparative advantage and can have maximum impact.

2. Since its establishment in 1993, the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Environment (CCGE) has served as a valuable high-level Commonwealth inter-governmental forum for consultations at ministerial level on environmental issues. Its meetings have helped to build consensus and promote policy development in key areas (e.g. forests, fisheries), as well as guide the Secretariat's work on environment. This background note provides an overview of Secretariat activities since Rio, which are relevant to the implementation of different parts of Agenda 21. Although it has been prepared for the information of the CCGE, its contents are pertinent to item 3 of the provisional Agenda.

### **International Co-operation to Accelerate Sustainable Development in Developing Countries and Related Domestic Policies**

3. The Secretariat's work on consensus building and policy development on international and national economic issues, enables the Commonwealth to contribute to the development of international economic policies for creating a stable international economic environment within which sustained economic growth and development can be achieved. It also promotes the adoption of more effective policies to deal with national economic issues in member countries. Areas of focus include international debt, especially the problems of severely indebted low-income countries and debt owed to multilateral institutions; promotion of private financial flows (foreign direct investment and portfolio flows) to Commonwealth developing countries; private sector and domestic capital market development; trade liberalisation and new issues in the post-Uruguay Round international trading system; strengthening regional economic co-operation; and trade, financial and economic management issues of concern to small states.

4. On debt, the Commonwealth has maintained a particularly active involvement in the resolution of the multilateral debt problem faced by heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC), through discussions and initiatives at Finance Ministers Meetings and technical work. On trade, it has undertaken technical work in two main areas: post-Uruguay Round challenges, including new issues such as trade and environment; and post-Lome IV arrangements for the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. A working group of senior Commonwealth finance officials is currently studying the role of national and international policies in encouraging private capital flows for investment. Under the Commonwealth Private Investment Initiative (CPII) launched by Finance Ministers in 1995, a series of regional funds are being established to channel long-term commercial investments in developing member countries. The first of these - the Commonwealth Africa Investment Fund - was launched in 1996; others are expected to be established before or at the 1997 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

## **Combating Poverty**

5. A commitment to assist members to eradicate poverty is reflected in all the Secretariat's activities in the field of economic and social development. Following the 1992 Commonwealth Consultation on Poverty Alleviation in Sri Lanka, an overall strategy was recommended for the explicit inclusion of poverty reduction objectives in development policies and programmes. Key aspects of this strategy include: pursuance of policies that encourage macro-economic stability, investment, long-term economic growth and equitable distribution of its benefits; the development of gender-inclusive food security policies; improvements in the agriculture sector as a means of increasing disposable incomes, generating increased demand for non-agricultural goods and services and, through a multiplier effect, stimulating growth in the rural sector; self-help programmes, such as rural credit and micro-credit for small-scale enterprise development; and human resource development through education and training.

6. Particular attention has been given to the integration of gender issues into policies on food security and rural development. On the basis of detailed country studies, a Handbook on Incorporating Gender in Food Security Policies was prepared for Africa, in consultation with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and the United Nations Development Fund for Women. The Handbook was distributed widely at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, and positive feedback has been received from African ministries responsible for agriculture and women's affairs, international development agencies, and NGOs.

## **Protecting and Promoting Human Health**

7. The Secretariat focuses on promoting technical co-operation which matches health resources to health needs, particularly in the priority areas of child survival, control of AIDS and other communicable diseases, human resource development for environment and health, and the reduction of drug abuse.

8. Environmental health impact assessment (EHIA) manuals, developed in collaboration with Australia, have been piloted in Tonga and Solomon Islands. The Secretariat convened a small expert group meeting, hosted by the Centre for Environmental Management and Planning in Aberdeen, to identify core health impact assessment requirements in EIA material and develop proposals for training applications of the core material. The framework developed by the group is being used in the Asia and Pacific regions for the preparation of training materials. In Africa, a regional survey of urban sanitation led to a pilot project for developing an integrated strategic plan in Zambia. A report describing progress has been prepared for distribution in the African region. Technical courses are being provided to a number of countries to build capacity for training of health and medical workers.

## **Integrating Environment and Development in Economic Decision-Making**

9. Technical assistance and training have helped to strengthen environmental planning processes and institutional capacities in several member countries. Since the costs of inappropriate economic policies on the environment are high, the Secretariat is also assisting members to move "upstream" by integrating environmental considerations in the early stages

of policy-making. Pan-Commonwealth and regional workshops held in Malta and Sri Lanka, respectively, helped economic and environmental policy-makers from several countries to gain a better understanding of the linkages between the economy and the environment; the practical dimensions of economic and environmental policy integration; and how market-based economic instruments such as pollution charges and taxes can be deployed to implement the "polluter pays" principle and achieve environmental objectives.

10. Further workshops are planned for the Commonwealth African and Caribbean regions, after which more specialised work will be undertaken, tailored to the specific requirements of individual countries or groups of countries. The Secretariat has published handbooks of training materials to assist policy-makers in integrating economic and environmental policies.

### **Protection of the Atmosphere**

11. Several Commonwealth members, especially small states, have a vital interest in the strengthening of the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Apart from monitoring developments in this area, the Secretariat also provides some technical assistance. For instance, it has helped to strengthen the capacity of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme to monitor climate change and sea-level rise.

### **Sustainable Forest Management**

12. The Secretariat is supporting the development of the Iwokrama International Rain Forest Programme in Guyana, which was launched under the Commonwealth's auspices in 1990. The Programme was made possible by Guyana's generous and unprecedented offer, at the 1989 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Malaysia, to set aside almost a million acres of its pristine rain forest for both conservation and sustainable development. Half of the forest is a Wilderness Preserve where biodiversity is being conserved for scientific research; the remainder will be exploited, in an environmentally sound manner, to provide economic benefits.

13. Following an agreement signed by the President of Guyana and the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the 1995 CHOGM in New Zealand, legislation was enacted unanimously by Guyana's Parliament in March 1996, guaranteeing the autonomy of the forest area and the Iwokrama International Centre which is responsible for its management. Governed by a distinguished Board of Trustees, the Centre has three core programmes: sustainable management of the tropical rain forest; conservation and sustainable utilisation of biodiversity; and sustainable human development. These are supported by two cross-cutting programmes: research on forests and biodiversity; and information and communication.

14. An operational plan and business plan have been prepared, and a Donor Support Group constituted, for Iwokrama. The Donor Support Group consists, at present, of the Government of Guyana; the Commonwealth Secretariat; the United Nations Development Programme and Global Environment Facility; and Canada's International Development Research Centre. The Secretariat, which has been a major provider of technical assistance, continues to guide the Iwokrama Programme's development through its membership of the

Board of Trustees. It is now co-ordinating efforts to mobilise additional support from the donor community, in order to make the Programme financially sustainable (see the paper CCGE(97)2). A Consortium is also being formed to enable Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth research institutions with interests in sustainable forest management and biodiversity, to participate in Iwokrama's research and training activities.

15. A complementary project, the Commonwealth Forestry Initiative (launched in 1993), is helping to disseminate experience gained from the management of production forests in Ghana, India, Uganda and Sri Lanka. Its findings were reported to the 15th Commonwealth Forestry Conference, held in Zimbabwe in May 1997, which focused on the theme, "Forestry in a Changing Political Environment: Challenges for the 21st Century". The Conference agreed a set of recommendations which recognise the role of forests in alleviation of poverty and general economic development; some of these recommendations will be brought to the attention of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in October this year. The Commonwealth has made a significant contribution to the activities of the independent World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development. The Commonwealth Secretary-General has been actively involved as one of the 25 Commissioners and Public Hearings have been held in Commonwealth countries such as Canada and the Cameroon.

16. The Secretariat's technical assistance activities in the forestry sector have included a review of university-level forestry training within the SADC region, undertaken for the Forestry Co-ordination Unit based in Malawi, and a study of timber utilisation in Uganda, which has resulted in an illustrated handbook to be used by the Forestry Department to train staff as well as the end-users of timber from natural forests.

### **Promoting Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development**

17. The Secretariat has assisted member countries to diversify their agriculture, develop livestock, and introduce new technologies for sustainable rural development activities. Together with non-governmental partners, it has published two books which set out the scientific and social aspects of problems in the management and sustainable use of communal rangelands in Africa. In the Caribbean, a study was made, with the support of Britain's Overseas Development Administration (ODA), of soil conservation and small-scale farming in the face of the continued loss of agricultural land on steep slopes due to erosion.

18. The Secretariat works closely with regional organisations, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI) and the Southern African Development Community, on agricultural development programmes. It also supports training courses in managing rural credit and other aspects of rural development. As noted earlier, sustainable agriculture-led rural development is the primary focus of the Secretariat's work on poverty alleviation.

### **Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity**

19. Member countries receive practical assistance to conserve and sustainably utilise their biological resources. Activities focus specifically on capacity-building through training, development of networks for exchange of information and expertise, and assistance with the

implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity. A pilot project for monitoring biodiversity and its utilisation in small island developing states has been launched.

20. More than 50 scientists, teachers and NGO representatives have received training in fields such as mycology, plant tissue culture and herbarium curation. A syllabus for a 10-module multimedia training programme on biodiversity management was developed as a joint initiative with the Commonwealth of Learning in 1994. In collaboration with the International Centre for Underutilised Crops, the Commonwealth Science Council (CSC) helped set up an Underutilised Tropical Fruit Network in Asia (UTFNANET) to improve propagation, production and management of tropical fruits. A similar network on Underutilised Crops for Southern and Eastern Africa is being developed, and one CSC project is helping to promote cassava as a crop which can improve the local and national economy as well as food security in Zimbabwe.

21. The Secretariat also supports the Iwokrama International Rain Forest Programme in Guyana (see paras 12-14 above), which is helping to improve methods for the conservation and sustainable use of the biological resources of the rain forest.

#### **Protection of Oceans, Seas, Coastal Areas and Living Marine Resources**

22. With support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Secretariat has undertaken a review of the management of marine resources in the Caribbean region which is being considered by environment ministers of CARICOM. A similar review of marine resources management in the Indian Ocean region is being undertaken with the participation of South Africa, Mauritius, India and Australia. The Secretariat also assists member countries with their implementation of coastal zone management programmes. In 1995, a project to provide training in the use of remote sensing and geographical information systems for the Caribbean region, was started at the Institute of Marine Affairs (IMA) in Trinidad and Tobago. Similar projects are expected to be introduced in the Indian Ocean and South Pacific regions. Technical assistance has helped to establish a new Physical Oceanography Unit at the IMA in Trinidad and Tobago, which is the region's leading centre in this discipline, and further managerial support has been provided to the IMA.

23. Member countries are assisted in several ways to manage and develop their fisheries and work is in hand on the scope for a possible Commonwealth fisheries protection agreement. In the legal domain, the Secretariat offers technical assistance in maritime boundary delimitation. One of the many projects currently in place involves support to co-ordinate boundary delimitation requirements for members of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States. Several countries have also been helped to develop regulatory frameworks and negotiate investment and access agreements for fisheries.

24. Surveys of marine fisheries and programmes for their sustainable development have been undertaken in several small states (e.g. Brunei and Papua New Guinea). In the latter, assistance is being provided to co-ordinate training and fisheries development programmes for women. Support for management training in the fisheries sector is being provided through a number of programmes for South Pacific small islands as well as countries in South Asia. Technical assistance has helped to strengthen the South Pacific Forum Fisheries Agency. At a more general level, the Secretariat is implementing a programme, partly

funded by CIDA, to review development assistance in the fisheries sector in a number of member countries. The objectives are to review the impact, effectiveness and limitations of international development assistance in the fisheries sector and to recommend ways in which any shortcomings may be overcome.

### **Sustainable Development of Small States**

25. Almost two-thirds of the Secretariat's technical assistance is directed to small member states, the majority of whom are small island developing states (SIDS). Much of the assistance given to Commonwealth SIDS is relevant to areas covered by the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action. These include: sustainable management of natural resources (especially coastal and marine resources); biodiversity conservation; water resources management; energy; tourism; science and technology; education and human resource development; management and administration; and strengthening of regional institutions. The Secretariat is also developing a Vulnerability Index for small states and is in the process of updating the 1985 Commonwealth Report on the Vulnerability of Small States. The new report, which is expected to be completed by October 1997, will address all aspects of vulnerability (security, economic, social, environmental) and identify strategies to promote the sustainable development of small states in the context of the rapid globalisation of the world economy.

### **Protection of the Quality and Supply of Freshwater Resources**

26. The Secretariat's work in this area focuses on improving capacities for managing and improving the quality of groundwater resources; water resources management in small islands and arid and semi-arid lands; and water supplies in urban and rural areas, including the introduction of low-cost, small-scale water treatment technology suitable for rural areas. To assist members with their preparations for the 1994 review, by the Commission on Sustainable Development, of this chapter of Agenda 21, the Secretariat prepared a paper highlighting strategic policy issues related to the management of water resources in an integrated manner. Technical assistance to the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission has addressed these issues in relation to small island states in the South Pacific. With the support of Britain's Overseas Development Administration, the Commonwealth Science Council is developing a computer-based Small Island Water Information Network (SIWIN) which will provide information to users in several formats (Internet, CD-ROM and print media). The Network has established nodes in Britain and in the Caribbean, South Pacific, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions.

### **Environmentally Sound Management of Hazardous Wastes**

27. Health and environmental concerns associated with hazardous wastes are of increasing concern to many member countries. A project has been initiated with the Royal Society of Chemistry of Britain to enhance the scientific capacities of developing member countries to manage and dispose of toxic waste; the project is being executed jointly with the UN Environment Programme. In the plastics sector, the Secretariat has helped member countries to find ways of putting plastics waste to good use through recycling. A Commonwealth Plastics Network, established in 1991 to exchange information in this area,

has since evolved into a Global Plastics Network. Technical assistance was provided to Barbados to strengthen environmental safety at the national oil company.

### **Major Groups**

28. In 1993, an NGO desk was established in the Commonwealth Secretariat to serve as a focal point for co-ordinating the organisation's dealings with NGOs, specifically with those involved in economic and social development at the grass-roots level. Several activities of the Secretariat now entail a considerable amount of interaction with NGOs inside and outside the Commonwealth. Criteria have also been agreed for the accreditation of NGOs at Commonwealth meetings, including those of Heads of Government.

29. Since the launch of a new Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development in 1995, the Secretariat has been integrating gender issues in an increasing number of divisional programmes and activities. The Secretariat is also providing technical assistance to help member governments to establish gender management systems and facilitate the initial stages of gender mainstreaming and management. Heads of Government and Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs urged member governments in 1993 to implement Chapter 24 of Agenda 21, emphasising that more women needed to have access to education and training if they were to be effective as environmental managers.

30. The Secretariat has developed a pan-Commonwealth training module on Women and the Environment, which comprises regional training manuals for the African, Asian, Caribbean and South Pacific regions; a video on 'Women of the Rain Forest'; and an overview of issues and strategies for promoting the role of women in natural resource management. The module is intended for use by trainers, extension workers, policy-makers and NGOs who require training materials on strategies used by women for the conservation of natural resources and integration of gender into environmental policies and programmes.

31. 'Environment' was the theme of the 1994 Youth Exchange Programme, organised by the Caribbean Centre of the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP). About 100 young women and men from 16 countries in the region participated in the two-week programme which focused on environmental protection. In collaboration with the International Youth Development and Environment Network, the CYP developed a series of materials, entitled 'Voices of the Rainbow', which highlight the perspectives of young people on the issues addressed by UNCED, as well as national policies of member countries relating to young people and the environment.

32. The Secretariat has established a Commonwealth Business Network aimed at strengthening the role of private business organisations throughout the Commonwealth in promoting international flows of trade, investment and technology for sustainable development. The Commonwealth Consultative Group on Technology Management (CCGTM), a co-operative network advising member countries on integrating technology management into their socio-economic and environmental planning processes, has been transformed from a unit within the Secretariat into a private company - the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management Ltd (CPTM), based in London. The CPTM is harnessing technology management for sustainable development through formal and informal partnerships between the public and private sectors in member countries.

## **Transfer of Environmentally Sound Technology**

33. The Secretariat has developed a programme focusing on the identification, transfer and development of environmentally sound technologies. This will assist decision-makers to make informed choices about alternative technology options in industrial development. The Commonwealth/Global Plastics Network mentioned earlier, also facilitates the dissemination of information on cleaner production techniques in the plastics sector.

## **Science for Sustainable Development**

34. Several activities help member countries to use science and technology for better environmental management. In Eastern and Southern Africa, the Secretariat has assisted the development of programmes for the biological control of waterweeds, by training scientists and helping to establish local colonies of the natural enemies (insects or bacteria) of such weeds. The Commonwealth Science Council decided in May 1997 to expand this programme to embrace all Commonwealth African countries with lakes contaminated by waterweeds. An integrated pest management programme also aims to promote the use of biological control techniques to combat infestation of whitefly, thrips, and the Diamondback moth in the Caribbean, as well as the pink mealybug in Grenada. In the energy sector, the Secretariat is assisting the introduction of photo-voltaic (PV) systems as a cheap and renewable source of energy in rural areas in Commonwealth Southern African countries. These projects include training for technicians in installing, repairing or upgrading local PV systems.

35. In order to improve natural resource management, workshops have been held for the African and Asian regions to impart training in the use of remote sensing and geographic information systems. A project is also being developed to train technicians from SIDS in the use of these technologies in integrated coastal zone management. Through the Chemical Research and Environmental Needs project in the Asia-Pacific region, member countries have also been helped to improve local capacities to monitor chemical changes in the environment, in the context of efforts to control chemical pollution.

## **Capacity Building in Developing Countries**

36. The Secretariat helps to develop skills and strengthen institutional capacities in sectors where member countries have identified their greatest needs. Under the Langkawi Awards Scheme (which ended in June 1994), about 400 Commonwealth nationals benefited from training programmes and workshops on several subjects, including general environmental management, pollution control, environmental assessment, marine environmental protection and soil and water conservation. Training programmes have since focused on strengthening capacities to deal with environmental disasters and hazards (e.g. in meteorology in small islands vulnerable to hurricanes); the preparation of practical manuals and guidelines for pollution prevention and control; and workshops to increase awareness of emerging critical issues in environmental management. Short-term training attachments have also been supported in areas such as environmental conservation, fisheries management and marine geology.

37. Technical assistance is provided to member countries in several areas. For instance, a public health adviser is helping St Lucia to review and restructure the operations of its Environmental Health Branch; an environmental economist/policy analyst is strengthening environmental and natural resource management at the Planning Institute of Jamaica; and

advisers have assisted the management of a Central Environmental Laboratory, the improvement of environmental legislation, and the development of environmental guidelines for the oil palm industry, in Mauritius, Brunei, and Papua New Guinea, respectively.

38. Assistance is also provided on a regional basis. For example, a long-term expert is helping the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP, based in Western Samoa) to implement a strategy for the protection of the marine environment in the South Pacific region; another has been assigned to the University of the West Indies Centre for Environment and Development to boost capacities for environmental management in Caribbean small island states; and workshops were held in all regions of the Commonwealth to enable senior planning officers to gain a better understanding of how environmental impact assessment (EIA) techniques can be used in the planning and monitoring of development projects. A Handbook on EIA has been prepared to complement these workshops.

### **International Legal Instruments and Mechanisms**

39. The Secretariat monitors the implementation of major international legal instruments on environmental issues which are of particular concern to member countries. It is helping them, particularly SIDS, to examine the legal implications of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and is developing a new project which will help to strengthen domestic legal capacities to implement important international environmental conventions in some member countries.

### **Conclusions**

40. As the foregoing overview suggests, the Secretariat has been assisting member countries to implement Agenda 21 in several ways, concentrating on areas where it has a comparative advantage and can achieve maximum impact. The future thrust of the Secretariat's work on environmentally sustainable development will continue to be guided by the priorities and needs of member countries. The role of the CCGE in providing policy guidance for the Secretariat's work will continue to be important.

41. Since the reforms introduced by the Secretariat in 1993, work on the environment has been mainly carried out under Programme C14 ("Environment"), which covers capacity building, consensus building and policy development, and support for the Iwokrama Programme. As a result of further adjustments which have been made to the Secretariat's overall programme of work, under the Third Three-Year Strategic Plan (1997/98 - 1999/2000) approved by the Commonwealth Steering Committee of Senior Officials in April 1997, work on environmental policy development (including consensus building) and the Iwokrama Programme will be undertaken through sub-programme B2.4 ("Policy Development on Environmental Issues and Programmes"), which will be one of the sub-programmes of the Secretariat's Programme on Economic Development (B1).

42. Technical assistance and training in the environmental field (among other areas) will be provided through Programme B6 ("Capacity Building"), and Programme B7 ("Science and Technology for Sustainable Development") will, *inter alia*, support activities in key areas of natural resource management, notably biodiversity, energy and water. Sub-programme B2.3 ("Promoting Trade, Industry, Agriculture, Poverty Alleviation and Infrastructure Development") will also provide support for some environmental projects.