



The Commonwealth

Third Global Biennial Conference on Small States

Opening remarks

Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma

St Lucia, 26 March 2014

Prime Minister, Honourable Kenny Anthony; Prime Minister Honourable Dr Denzil Douglas;
Honourable Ministers; Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen...

It is a great pleasure to greet you and bid you welcome. In co-hosting this conference with the Government of St Lucia – for whose generosity we are most grateful – the [Commonwealth Secretariat](#) continues its longstanding role of convening and advocacy to advance the interests of small states.

The [Commonwealth Charter](#), adopted by our Heads of Government on behalf of the people of the Commonwealth, affirms this. It states:

'We are committed to assisting small and developing states in the Commonwealth, including the particular needs of small island developing states, in tackling their economic, energy, climate change and security challenges, and in building their resilience for the future.'

Building resilience is the theme of this conference and is a primary Commonwealth focus; inclusivity is another. That is why in the Commonwealth's global advocacy role with groupings such as the G20, we seek to be a voice expressing the concerns of those who do not have a seat at the table.

This conference carries forward that work and seeks to broaden it and deepen it. We are gratified to have with us officials from so many small states, and such excellent representation from bilateral, multilateral and regional organisations and partners. Such participation will inform, energise, and greatly enrich both the deliberations and the outcomes of our gathering. You are all most warmly welcome.

It is fitting that this third global biennial conference should be taking place now, in what has been designated as the International Year of Small Island Developing States, and as we move towards the UN Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States in Samoa in September. Of course not all small states are island states. Nor – as the word 'global' in the conference title indicates – are all participants Commonwealth member states. We have long sought to convert our knowledge and wisdom and practical work into global contributions with global relevance.

Today what we share is also an awareness of meeting at an important juncture. The target date for the Millennium Development Goals will soon be upon us – and so it is time to take stock of progress made and lessons learned. For the future, the international community is looking to shape the post-2015 development agenda. We must ensure that these and other global processes, as well as international systems and institutions, are more responsive to the needs of small and vulnerable states.

The [Commonwealth Secretariat](#) for its part is in the first of a four year strategic plan, which charges us to strengthen the capacity of our smaller member states to withstand stresses and

overcome vulnerabilities. My colleagues who you will meet here over the next few days are responsible for a spectrum of development policy conceptualisation, analysis, research, piloting ideas, consensus building and advocacy.

This conference is an occasion when the threads are carefully examined and drawn together. We hope these two days will provide a forum for sharing best practices and experiences, and lead to agreement on specific areas of concern where stronger advocacy and greater practical support can be advanced.

Growth is one of those areas of concern. Small states are disproportionately affected by frequent and prolonged economic and weather related shocks. They are beset by challenges when seeking to accelerate economic growth and improve development outcomes. Limited ability to withstand or rebound from adverse shocks causes extended periods of economic downturn. The aftermath of such stresses can also result in the erosion of hard-won social gains.

Even for those small states that enjoy relatively high per capita GDP, and give the impression of being economically robust, the reality is that they are fragile, disproportionately affected by external shocks and lack resilience.

All of this together has adversely affected the level of support offered by the international community to these countries.

Another concern is the Millennium Development Goals, where small states continue to lag behind. Our Commonwealth publication: *The Big Divide: A Ten Year Report of Small Islands Developing States and the Millennium Development Goals*, shows that small states - especially micro-states - have made limited progress as compared to larger states. It shows that there is a dearth of data and statistics, and demonstrates the challenges for small states in reporting on many of the fifty or so indicators across the eight goals.

Another core concern is debt, and I acknowledge with deep appreciation the participation of the Prime Minister of St Kitts and Nevis, the Honourable Dr Denzil Douglas, who has spearheaded our high-level advocacy, and who is with us today. Many small states are now reporting high and unsustainable debt ratios. This situation has been precipitated by factors such as the waning of concessional finance since the early 1990s, and successive environmental and economic shocks - including oil and food price crises in 2007/8, and the global financial and economic crisis of 2008/9.

Despite debt restructuring by highly-indebted small states, most continue to face high and unsustainable debt burdens. This indicates that existing mechanisms are incapable of delivering the relief necessary if small states are to service borrowing. Spiralling debt burdens smother growth and severely impair development. Tackling the structural causes of such persistent impediments is paramount.

The constraint of human capacity is an abiding one. Strong institutions are important if small states are to build resilience. But high overheads make local institutional structures inherently more expensive per capita. Lack of specialist expertise compounds the problem. These sorts of

constraints affect development and growth, and – at the practical level – limit the ability of small states to engage effectively in multilateral processes on issues affecting them.

I would draw attention here to the contribution made by our Commonwealth Small States Offices in the multilateral hubs of New York and Geneva. They provide subsidised office space to enable the diplomatic missions of Commonwealth small states to engage fully with the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and participate in international decision-making processes.

In addition the Commonwealth Office in Geneva also provides office space as outposts for small state intergovernmental regional organisations. The Office also has resident trade and human rights experts to provide technical assistance in those fields for the tenants and visiting small states delegations requiring support in their multilateral engagement in organisations based in Geneva.

Distinguished guests...

I mentioned the theme of this meeting: 'Building Resilience in Small States'. We are grateful for the work of the technical working group, which was constituted to re-examine both the resilience framework developed by the Commonwealth and the wider body of related knowledge on overcoming vulnerability, with a view to determining what further work is needed to improve and strengthen the framework.

The group concluded that attention needs to be paid to implementing good policy practices in several areas. These include: macro-economic stability; micro-economic market efficiency; good governance; social development and cohesion; and sound environmental management.

On these and other priorities this conference will, I feel sure, identify practical and evidence-based policy options that will provide whatever may be lacking in existing resilience frameworks, raise the effectiveness of advocacy, and lift provision of technical assistance and capacity-building for small states.

We in the Commonwealth are deeply conscious that continued progress depends upon strategic orientation and well-chosen partnerships. We are therefore committed to working closely with others to ensure that, through collaborative partnership and coordinated activity, the necessary attention is accorded to the priorities of small states.

We wish you all well in the deliberations ahead.