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## INTRODUCTION

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The number of Commonwealth developing countries which are islands or which suffer particular disadvantages as a result of their small size, their remoteness from major centres and their limited resources is large. Because of their relative poverty and shortages of trained personnel, they are especially at risk in the face of disease epidemics and natural disasters.

These small countries need the services of a variety of categories of trained staff, which they cannot easily obtain. Their resources for staff training are generally very limited. They are rarely in a position to maintain expensive clinical facilities. The cost of their imports of medicinal drugs takes up a substantial portion of their small health budgets. Some of them are composed of scattered groups of islands with small communities, and are thus faced with difficult problems of transport and communication.

The health needs of such countries have long been the concern of Commonwealth Health Ministers' meetings, of Commonwealth regional groupings and organisations, and of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Significant achievements have already been made through regional cooperation; and for many of the smaller countries a regional approach is seen as essential if a reasonable level of health care is to be reached and maintained. Nevertheless, activities to assist small and disadvantaged countries have often lacked a special focus, and further strengthening of regional, and also inter-regional, cooperation geared particularly to the needs of those countries with the least resources seems to be required.

The need to concentrate attention on the special needs of the smaller states has been underlined at recent Commonwealth meetings at the highest level. Senior Commonwealth officials, meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1978, saw the need to recognise the unique difficulties encountered by these states and, where appropriate, to develop special supplementary programmes of action designed to help overcome them. The Lusaka Meeting of Heads of Government in 1979 agreed that special measures of support were required to offset the disadvantages of small size, isolation and scarce resources, which severely limit the capacity of such countries to achieve their development objectives. The meeting requested the Commonwealth Secretary-General to pursue a programme of action which will enable the Commonwealth to respond both multilaterally and bilaterally to the special needs of smaller and specially disadvantaged member countries.

These considerations are explained by the Assistant Secretary-General, Professor K.S. Murshid, when welcoming to Marlborough House, on behalf of the Secretary-General, the meeting of experts convened to focus special attention on the special health problems of island developing and other specially disadvantaged countries, held from 21 to 25 January 1980. He emphasised the need to analyse these special problems, pointing out that they are not merely a scaled-down version of the problems of larger countries but are often different problems qualitatively.

The members of the expert group were invited to examine these problems and to make recommendations as to how they should most effectively be tackled, by individual governments, by regional groups of countries and by the Commonwealth Secretariat and other agencies, within available resources.

They were asked to undertake this task in their individual capacities, rather than as representatives of their particular countries or institutions. The Secretariat is grateful to the members of the group for putting their special knowledge and experience at the disposal of the Commonwealth.

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This report of the meeting includes a list of the conclusions reached, a summary of the discussions, an introductory paper prepared by the Secretariat, papers prepared by participants who led the discussion on particular topics, and other papers contributed by participants.

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\*The Ciba Foundation was established 30 years ago in London to promote international cooperation in medical and chemical research. The Foundation is fully independent and its activities are determined by its staff and expert advisers. It organises small inter-disciplinary international scientific meetings, publishes scientific books and research reviews, offers library and information services and has some accommodation in London for visiting scientists and doctors. The Foundation is not normally a grant-giving agency, but has a particular interest in meetings in the health field, such as the one covered by this report, the aim of which is to produce guidelines for practical action.