

Foreword by the Commonwealth Secretary-General

Interest in environmental issues and concerns over the sustainability of development are intensifying in many governmental and other circles in the run up to the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The Commonwealth is no exception to this trend and when its leaders meet this October in Harare for their biennial summit, environmental issues are likely to be a major topic in their deliberations. Commonwealth concerns over the environment are not, of course, new and at their last summit they adopted the Langkawi Declaration on Environment, a joint commitment to tackle environmental problems and a mandate for Commonwealth action. That action included requesting me to identify a group of experts to deal with environmental issues.

The Report which follows is the work of that Group. It identifies several issues on UNCED's agenda which are of special interest to the Commonwealth. The Report also attempts to answer the question of what, in practice, is meant by the widely accepted principle that development should be sustainable. It does so by elucidating the concept of sustainable development, concentrating on critical areas such as energy, land, forests, biodiversity, water and the oceans. It also highlights the need to build effective institutional arrangements, especially at the national level. In addition, the Report stresses the importance of additional financial resources and transfers of environmentally sound technology to strengthen the efforts of developing countries to put their development onto a sustainable path. Many of these countries are faced with difficult choices and have limited options because of financial, technical and human resource constraints. They should be enabled to meet not only their pressing short-term needs but their long-term requirements.

The increasing concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere—the cause of global warming—is a grim indication of the unsustainability of many current economic activities. The 1989 Commonwealth Expert Group report on Climate Change did much to clarify the nature of the threats posed

by global warming and sea-level rise, and the rationale for national and international responses to address them. The new Report points to the areas where the international community must act soon to bring this problem under control.

I believe the Report makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of the complexity of environmental issues. It does so not least through the light it sheds on two subjects which hitherto have too often been ignored: the environmental concerns of small states, and the gender aspects of environmental and development problems.

Small states, which constitute more than half the Commonwealth's membership, fear that their concerns are being pushed to the sidelines. Their environmental problems are admittedly not unique. But most small states are more vulnerable than larger countries to the chaos which environmental phenomena can cause. Smallness and vulnerability are directly related. Entire nations can become disaster 'zones' when tropical storms or tidal waves strike. The protection and proper management of coastal zones is important in all countries bordering the sea. But it is vital in island small states where coastal zones are of strategic importance to the entire economy. In 1985 a Commonwealth Expert Group's report had alerted the world to the special economic and security problems of small states. The present Report underscores the necessity of paying heed to these states' environmental concerns.

The Report also reminds us that, as with poverty, the related problems of environmental degradation have important gender dimensions. But women are not merely passive victims of environmental stress. In most countries they are playing vital roles—largely unrecognised—in fostering sustainable development. The Report shows how the constraints which in many countries prevent women from playing more effective roles in environmental management can be removed; and why there is an urgent need to ensure a greater role for women in decision-making on environmental and developmental issues at local, national and international levels.

An important message which the Report conveys is that it is in the common interest of all humanity to ensure that developmental and environmental goals are achieved in a harmonious way, and particularly that the solution of global environmental problems demands global co-operation. International negotiations on environmental problems are not a zero-sum game, with winners and losers. All nations stand to gain from effective and equitable agreements to protect the world's climate, its forests, its rich biological diversity, its soils and its oceans. But there are conflicts of interest between developed and developing countries, especially over issues like burden-sharing. The great challenge is to find ways of reconciling them at the UNCED, in the interest of our common future. I hope that the Commonwealth, with its established capacity for facilitating North/South consensus, can help that process.

I was fortunate in being able to constitute a group of experts with a wealth of expertise and experience from around the Commonwealth to undertake this Report. Under the able guidance of their Chairman, Mrs Pauline Marstrand, the members have completed a challenging task in a remarkably short period of time. I am pleased to present their Report to Commonwealth Governments and to make it available to the wider international community.

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