

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Background

1.1 Though not new to the Commonwealth's agenda, environmental issues commanded particular attention in the deliberations of Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Kuala Lumpur in 1989. This was hardly surprising at a time when environmental concerns were occupying the centre stage in international concerns—a situation which is likely to persist for some time to come. At that meeting, Commonwealth leaders unanimously adopted the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment, thereby expressing their collective resolve to support action on a broad agenda of critical environmental problems—ranging from ozone depletion to land degradation—through a programme of action at the national and international levels. One of those problems—climate change—was the subject of a report by a Commonwealth Group of Experts which Heads of Government discussed^{1*}. They decided to ask the Commonwealth Secretary-General to identify a group of experts on the environment who could monitor and evaluate developments concerning climate change and deal with other environmental issues as needs arose.

1.2 Developments following the Malaysia meeting played an important part in progressively extending this mandate for the establishment of our Group. The preparatory process for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) got underway, raising a number of other issues on which the Commonwealth has a strong interest. Indeed, virtually all the issues addressed in the Langkawi Declaration were on the agenda of the Preparatory Committee established for the UNCED. A particular factor which became clear early in the regional-level preparatory work for UNCED

^{1*} All references in this Report are placed at the end of each Chapter.

was that it did not address the usual problems that small states face, that is, in getting the international system to pay attention to their special concerns. Since these states have large representation in the Commonwealth, pressure developed to assist them ensure that the UNCED process did pay some attention to their concerns.

1.3 Later, in Ottawa in October 1990, Commonwealth Ministers responsible for Women's Affairs considered, among other subjects, the gender dimensions of environmental problems and action. Considerable emphasis was given to the importance of recognising and strengthening women's roles in fostering sustainable development at all levels and of guarding against the propensity of some development activities to have disproportionately harmful implications for women. Ministers therefore asked the Secretary-General to convene a meeting of Commonwealth Experts on Women, the Environment and Development to discuss the issues and make appropriate recommendations to Commonwealth governments and the 1992 UNCED.

1.4 Paralleling these developments, the Managing Director of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC) was asked by the 1989 Heads of Government Meeting to report to the 1990 meeting of Commonwealth Senior Officials on the extent of support CFTC could offer to programmes addressing environmental concerns and how its capacity in this area might be strengthened. A study commissioned on this and used as an input in the Managing Director's report to Senior Officials was subsequently made available to us as well as to Commonwealth governments, for whom it should provide guidance in their requests for assistance on environmental issues.

The Group's Approach

1.5 In constituting our Group, the Secretary-General, therefore, assigned us terms of reference (set out in Annex 1 on page 150) which were broad and flexible enough to respond to all these needs and concerns expressed by Commonwealth governments. Broadly speaking, our mandate required us to examine issues on the UNCED agenda which are of special interest to the Commonwealth and which at the same time particularly address the problems of small states and the relationship between women-in-development and environmental concerns. The composition of our Group—in terms of both expertise and geographical representation—was determined bearing in mind the varied nature of our tasks.

1.6 At our first meeting in London in May 1991, in considering how we would approach those tasks, we were conscious of the urgency of completing

our Report in time for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Harare in October 1991 and of the quickening tempo of preparations for the UNCED. We agreed that, on balance, it was preferable to be selective in identifying issues of concern to the Commonwealth. We emphasise that in doing so, we did not intend in any way to diminish the importance of those environmental issues and problems which we decided not to cover. We have devised a set of principles which we believe are vital to the achievement of sustainable development (Chapter 2), and we have highlighted a number of areas critical to efforts in this regard (Chapter 3). Because climate change due to global warming will have far-reaching implications for many countries, cutting across virtually all economic and social sectors, we have in Chapter 4 addressed some of the key developments which have occurred since the publication of the Commonwealth Expert Group Report, "Climate Change: Meeting the Challenge". The special concerns of small states and the gender dimensions of environmental problems are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively. We hope that our analysis of the issues, and the recommendations we have made in both these areas, will contribute to their receiving greater attention both within the Commonwealth and globally, especially at the 1992 UNCED. Finally, in Chapter 7 we address issues which cut across all environmental and developmental problems. The development of effective institutional arrangements and policies, and the skilled human resources which lie behind them, are prerequisites for putting development on a sustainable path. This is especially so in developing countries. Financial and technological constraints must also be alleviated if these countries are to succeed in halting environmental degradation without jeopardising their economic growth and development.

1.7 We have proposed a number of measures which we hope will assist Commonwealth governments in developing effective responses—through both individual and joint action—to major environmental problems. Although our recommendations are in the main addressed to the Commonwealth, we believe they will also be of interest to the wider international community. We recognise that in certain areas the Commonwealth has resources, institutions and skills to assist its members to cope more effectively with the problems both of the environment and of development. But in others, the Commonwealth must act in concert with other nations, lending its collective support to international efforts, and relying on action by the wider international community to give greater resonance to its own actions.

1.8 We should mention that in the course of our work we received considerable help from our consultants, Mrs Suliana Siwatibau of UNDP (based in Vanuatu), Mr James Winpenny of the Overseas Development Institute (London), Ms Jennifer McCracken of the Institute for Environment and Development (London) and Ms Joan Davidson of Oxfam, UK. We are grateful to them all.

1.9 We hope that our Report will serve to clarify the basis for further action on the environment by Commonwealth governments, and also assist them in making an effective collective contribution to the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development.

Reference

1. *Climate Change: Meeting the Challenge*, Report by a Commonwealth Group of Experts, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, 1989.