

Introduction

The economic crises which hit much of the developing world in the 1980s disrupted the progress women had been making, leading to a decline in many countries in their already unequal position.

In response to this situation, in October 1987 Commonwealth Heads of Government asked the Commonwealth Secretariat to convene an Expert Group, following the recommendation of Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, who had met in Zimbabwe earlier that year. The Group's task was to identify the extent of women's contribution to different economies, examine the evidence of the impact of structural adjustment measures, and consider alternative policies that would be socially and economically more effective*.

This Expert Group was set up early in 1988: members were drawn from a representative cross-section of Commonwealth countries, bringing together experience in two streams of research and policy-making: women in development; and structural adjustment. We held three meetings in London between June 1988 and June 1989. The inadequacy of sex-disaggregated data and the scarcity of studies on the effects of structural adjustment policies on women severely constrained our work. To fill some of these gaps we asked the Secretariat to commission case-studies in nine Commonwealth developing countries†, chosen because their conditions were similar to many of their neighbours, thus providing a regional dimension. The studies were generously funded by CIDA, UNICEF and the UNDP. Their results have enabled us to make a more thorough analysis and consider viable alternative measures.

In the Report that follows we first provide an Executive Summary of the succeeding chapters, highlighting our recommendations by setting out six general areas for action by governments, international agencies

*The Group's full Terms of Reference are at Annex I.

†Bangladesh, Jamaica, Malaysia, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

and non-governmental organisations. Chapter 1 sets the scene. It describes the broad progress that was experienced by most women from 1950 to 1980 and then reviews the sharp deterioration in the external environment facing many developing countries in the 1980s, with the slow-down in global economic growth, deteriorating terms of trade for primary products and growing debt crisis, leading to a need for radical economic adjustment in many countries, especially in Latin America and Africa. Women were affected more harshly than men in most areas, because of their special social and economic roles. The four roles of women—as producers, home managers, mothers and social organisers—are analysed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 reviews how adjustment policies have affected women in each of these roles. Chapter 4 reports on action taken to ameliorate the adverse effects on vulnerable groups generally and women in particular, both by national governments and international institutions. It concludes that the action so far has been **far too little**. Chapter 5 sets out a strategy for change, with recommendations for a broader approach to adjustment, fully incorporating women's concerns. This approach, we believe, would not only avoid much unnecessary suffering, but also greatly increase the social and economic efficiency of the adjustment process.