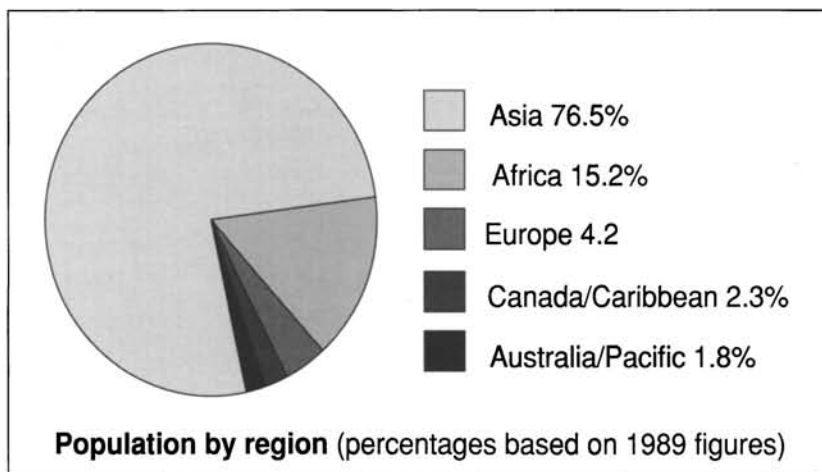




A quarter of the world's population lives in the 50 countries which make up the Commonwealth. These countries include some of the richest nations in the world and many of the poorest. They range greatly in size of population. There are member countries in every continent and ocean; there is wide diversity in language, culture, religious faith, race and way of life.

Nonetheless, countries have many common aims which the Commonwealth helps them to pursue. The growth of membership has made it a wider sample of the world and the Commonwealth has become one of the strongest voluntary international associations.

The Commonwealth provides a framework for collective activities embracing all member nations, and for co-operation between neighbouring member states. In industry and agriculture, education, health, law and many other fields, Commonwealth countries gain from working together.

The Declarations

All member countries share important beliefs. These are set out in the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, adopted by Heads of Government at their Singapore meeting in 1971 and in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991. They commit governments:

- to the pursuit of world peace and support of the United Nations
- to combat racial discrimination and oppression
- to further the principle of self-determination
- to work against poverty, ignorance and sickness and to reduce inequalities of wealth in the world
- to work for wider international trade on fair terms to all partners, and to encourage sustained investment and growth in developing countries.

Meetings

Consultation and collaboration take place at many levels. Governments and ministries keep in touch with each other directly, through their High Commissions, and through the Commonwealth Secretariat, the organisation set up by governments to run their joint programmes.

At the highest level, Heads of Government meet every two years to talk over world issues and co-operation in the Commonwealth. They meet in an informal environment, where decisions are reached by consensus.

Finance, education, health, youth, agriculture, law and women's ministers also meet regularly, and so do senior government officials.

This collaboration extends beyond governments into many professional fields. Commonwealth magistrates, doctors, nurses, university vice-chancellors, journalists, broadcasters and people in many other walks of life share experience across national frontiers. The Commonwealth Foundation supports professional links in many fields.

Communication

Communication between Commonwealth members is made easier because many ideals are shared and practices in law, education, and government are similar. Members also share a working language. English is not the first language of the majority, yet throughout the Commonwealth people in government, the professions and business find it a valuable tool of communication. Modern literature in English has been enriched by writers from all over the Commonwealth.

Sharing resources

Programmes of mutual assistance enable Commonwealth countries to share their resources. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation is the main agency for this exchange. At the request of governments, it supplies experts to work in many areas, from constitutional law to the local production of farm tools.

The CFTC also provides scholarships which enable developing Commonwealth countries to have people trained in other developing member countries with conditions similar to their own. Both developed and developing countries contribute resources to the CFTC which is administered by the Secretariat.

To speed up economic advance in Commonwealth developing countries, the Secretariat advises governments on agreements over natural resources with multinational corporations, helps manufacturers enlarge their export markets and promotes the exchange of knowledge in many fields.

Organisation

The Commonwealth has no formal structure or constitution. Queen Elizabeth is regarded as the symbol of the association, and as such Head of the Commonwealth. The Queen is also sovereign of 16 Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth Secretariat administers Commonwealth programmes, arranges meetings and provides information and specialist services to member countries. The head of the Secretariat is the Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku from Nigeria. He is directly responsible to all member governments. The Secretariat is located in London. Its costs are shared by governments and staff are drawn from member countries.

The Commonwealth and the World

The Commonwealth is complementary to the United Nations and the two bodies work often together. Its network is strengthened because member states belong to many regional and other organisations, and the Commonwealth forms a bridge between these various bodies.