

The Role of the Commonwealth

What role can the Commonwealth play in supporting democracies in poverty reduction? As we have noted at various points in this paper, the Commonwealth already plays a significant role in conflict resolution and peace-building and, through the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, exercises peer pressure on member countries which are violating democracy. It also reinforces the processes and institutions of democracy through observing elections and helping with capacity building. By linking countries at different stages of development, it brings greater understanding of the problems affecting which affect them, including why poverty persists and the problems democracies face in combating it. And it has a modest programme of technical assistance that is appreciated for its practical value in building up human and institutional capacities in democracies, as in the areas of good governance and pro-poor social and economic policies. Given such a backdrop, how can the Commonwealth play an even bigger role in supporting democracies in combating poverty? We believe that it could:

- Become a more visible symbol for tolerance and respect for pluralism, which in turn should help promote peace at national and international level;
- Attract greater attention to the complex challenges facing democracies and act as a catalyst in the international community to promote action that helps them;
- Enhance its peer pressure role in promoting democracy, good governance and pro-poor growth policies in member countries where action is lacking because of lack of political will at national level. This applies both to its industrialised country members (which could, for example, dismantle trade barriers against the agricultural exports of developing countries) and to its developing country members;
- Promote intra-Commonwealth co-operation in those areas where at present international co-operation falls short of what is needed – for example, sharing intelligence in the fight to combat terrorism;
- Enhance its technical assistance for member countries, focusing in particular on those areas where democracy and development are interconnected – post-conflict reconstruction, electoral processes and parliamentary institutions, the rule of law, human rights, good governance, gender equality and those activities that empower the poor such as property rights, micro-credit, education, health and reduced vulnerability to crises. Such a focus would have the double dividend of strengthening democracy and development at the same time.