

Discussion Papers

Commonwealth and Sustainable Development Goals

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Research and Information System
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Commonwealth and Sustainable Development Goals

Balakrishna Pisupati*

Introduction

The role and relevance of the Commonwealth country grouping continue to have certain impact today in spite of increasing challenges to multilateralism. The group today constitutes a population of 2.4 billion, of which more than 60 percent is aged 29 or under giving the group uncommon demographic dividend to be used. The combined gross domestic product of Commonwealth countries is estimated at US\$10.4 trillion in 2017 and predicted to reach US\$13 trillion in 2020. Bilateral costs for trading partners in Commonwealth countries are on average 19 percent less than between those in non-member countries. With half of the top 20 global emerging cities in the Commonwealth and many small and developing Commonwealth countries having, the countries make up 7 of the top 10 highest performing countries for gender equality¹.

With the Commonwealth consistently ranking third in the global ‘Index of Economic Freedom’, with trade and investment flows increasing by up to 20% and the cost of doing business reduced by up to 19%; and trade among Commonwealth countries is projected to increase to USD 1 trillion by 2020 - the impact of this ‘Family of Nations’ cannot be ignored.

The next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is scheduled to be held in London during April 2018. United Kingdom will take over as the Chair-in-Office for the Commonwealth from Malta and will hold office until 2020.

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Held under the title, ‘Our Common Future’, the Meeting will focus on themes including, ‘A More Sustainable Future’, ‘A More Secure Future’ and ‘A More Fairer Future’. There will be forums held on topics ‘people’, ‘business’, ‘women’ and ‘youth’.

According to the Commonwealth Secretariat, member states face common challenges: weak global trade and investment flows, new cross-border security threats, the effects of climate change on small and other vulnerable states, threats to shared values of democracy, good governance and inclusivity as set out in the Commonwealth Charter. The impact of Brexit on commonwealth is also expected to receive attention during the coming months.

However, the diminishing voice and ability of the member states to project commonwealth as a group that can influence global and regional issues, including on trade, security and environment is a key question for the members that need focus during the Meeting.

This paper focuses on how the Commonwealth countries can work towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), outlining current actions – as presented by the member states to the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) established in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly to review actions to achieving the SDGs, need for mainstreaming actions across relevant international commitments related to SDGs, specific actions that could foster better cooperation among the Commonwealth countries and provide a set of recommendations for consideration at the forthcoming CHOGM 2018 meeting.

Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a negotiated, multilateral plan of action for people, planet and prosperity that was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2015. The Agenda includes a set of 17 internationally agreed set of Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) along with 169 targets to achieve the SDGs. The Agenda also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger

freedom. It aims to eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty which is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.

All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. Member States of the United Nations have agreed to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path with an overall motto that no one will be left behind. The SDGs seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental. It is expected that the Goals and targets will stimulate action over the next fifteen years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet. Broadly, the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development is framed around people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. The interlinkages and integrated nature of the SDGs are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realised².

High Level Political Forum (HLPF)

The HLPF is the main United Nations platform on sustainable development and it has a central role in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the global level. The UN General Assembly resolution 70/299³ provides further guidance on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

The establishment of the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was mandated in 2012 by the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), “The Future We Want”. The format and organizational aspects of the Forum are outlined in General Assembly resolution 67/290.

The Forum meets annually under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council for eight days, including a three-day ministerial segment

and every four years at the level of Heads of State and Government under the auspices of the General Assembly for two days. The Forum adopts inter-governmentally negotiated political declarations.

In 2017 the HLP focused on national actions and the related to SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 14 while in 2018 the focus will be on SDG 6, 7, 11, 12 and 15; and in 2019 on Goals 4, 8, 10, 13 and 16;

The Paris Agreement

At the Paris climate conference (UNFCCC, COP21) in December 2015, 195 countries adopted the first-ever universal, legally binding global climate deal. The agreement sets out a global action plan to put the world on track to avoid dangerous climate change by limiting global warming to well below 2°C.

The Paris Agreement is a bridge between today's policies and climate-neutrality before the end of the century and focuses on the following:

Mitigation: reducing emissions

- a long-term goal of keeping the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels;
- aim to limit the increase to 1.5°C, since this would significantly reduce risks and the impacts of climate change;
- the need for global emissions to peak as soon as possible, recognising that this will take longer for developing countries;
- undertake rapid reductions thereafter in accordance with the best available science.

Before and during the Paris conference, countries submitted comprehensive national climate action plans (INDCs). These are not yet enough to keep global warming below 2°C, but the agreement traces the way to achieving this target.

Transparency and global stocktake

- come together every 5 years to set more ambitious targets as required by science;
- report to each other and the public on how well they are doing to implement their targets;
- track progress towards the long-term goal through a robust transparency and accountability system.

Adaptation

- Strengthen societies' ability to **deal with the impacts** of climate change;
- provide continued and enhanced international **support** for adaptation to **developing countries**.

Loss and damage

- recognises the importance of averting, minimising and addressing loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change;
- acknowledges the need to cooperate and enhance the understanding, action and support in different areas such as early warning systems, emergency preparedness and risk insurance⁴.

The Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing Sustainable Development

During the third international conference on financing for sustainable development, member states of the UN adopted the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda* that provides a foundation for implementing the global sustainable development agenda. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda includes important policy commitments and key deliverables in critical areas for sustainable development, including infrastructure, social protection and technology. There were agreements for international cooperation for financing of specific areas where significant investments are needed, such as in infrastructure for energy, transport, water and sanitation, and other areas to help realize the proposed sustainable development goals.

Countries also stressed the importance of nationally owned sustainable development strategies, supported by integrated national financing frameworks.

To achieve these goals, countries also agreed to new initiatives, including on:

Technology—Countries agreed to establish a Technology Facilitation Mechanism at the Sustainable Development Summit in September to boost collaboration among governments, civil society, private sector, the scientific community, United Nations entities and other stakeholders to support the sustainable development goals.

Infrastructure—Countries agreed to establish a Global Infrastructure Forum to identify and address infrastructure gaps, highlight opportunities for investment and cooperation, and work to ensure that projects are environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

Social protection—Countries adopted a new social compact in favour of the poor and vulnerable groups, through the provision of social protection systems and measures for all, including social protection floors.

Health—Countries agreed to consider taxing harmful substances to deter consumption and to increase domestic resources. They agreed that taxes on tobacco reduce consumption and could represent an untapped revenue stream for many countries.

Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises—Countries committed to promote affordable and stable access to credit for smaller enterprises. They also pledged to develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the International Labour Organization Global Jobs Pact by 2020.

Foreign aid—Countries recommitted to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income for official development assistance, and 0.15 to 0.20 per cent for least developed countries.

A package of measures for the poorest countries—Developed countries commit to reverse the decline in aid to the poorest countries, with the European Union committing to increase its aid to least developed countries to 0.2 per cent of gross national income by 2030. They also agree to adopt or strengthen least developed countries investment promotion regimes, including with financial and technical support. Governments also aim to operationalize the technology bank for this group of countries by 2017.

Taxation—The Agenda calls for strengthening support for the work of the UN Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters to improve its effectiveness and operational capacity, and the engagement with the Economic and Social Council. It emphasizes the importance of inclusive cooperation and dialogue among national tax authorities.

Climate Change—The Action Agenda calls on developed countries to implement their commitment to a goal of jointly mobilizing USD100 billion per year by 2020 from a wide variety of sources to address the needs of developing countries. Countries also committed to phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that lead to wasteful consumption⁵.

SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway

The outcome of the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS), in which countries recognize the need to support and invest in these nations so they can achieve sustainable development, is the SAMOA Pathway.

The paragraphs 51 and 52 of the Pathway recognize the importance of disaster risk reduction and affirm Member States' commitment to implement the Hyogo Framework for Action and to support Small Island Developing States efforts in:

gaining access to technical assistance and financing for early warning systems, disaster risk reduction and post-disaster response and recovery, risk assessment and data, land use and planning, observation equipment, disaster preparedness and recovery education programmes and disaster risk management;

- promoting cooperation and investment in disaster risk management in the public and private sectors;
- strengthening and supporting contingency planning and provisions for disaster preparedness and response;
- mainstreaming policies and programmes related to disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and development;
- harmonizing national and regional reporting systems;
- establishing and strengthening risk insurance facilities; and
- increasing participation in international and regional disaster risk reduction initiatives.

The SAMOA Pathway reaffirms that SIDS remain a special case for sustainable development, recognizing SIDS's ownership and leadership in overcoming these challenges. It addresses the following issues: sustained and sustainable, inclusive and equitable economic growth with decent work for all; climate change; sustainable energy; disaster risk reduction (DRR); oceans and seas; food security and nutrition; water and sanitation; sustainable transport; sustainable consumption and production (SCP); health and non-communicable diseases (NCDs); gender equality and women's empowerment; social development; biodiversity, including desertification, land degradation, drought and forests; invasive alien species (IAS); means of implementation, including partnerships, financing, trade, capacity-building, technology, data and statistics, and institutional support for SIDS; SIDS priorities for the post-2015 agenda; and monitoring and accountability⁶.

Sendai Framework

The Sendai Framework is a 15-year, voluntary, non-binding agreement which recognizes that the State has the primary role to reduce disaster risk but that responsibility should be shared with other stakeholders including local government, the private sector and other stakeholders. It aims for the following outcome: *The substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries.*

The Framework deals with seven global targets

- (a) Substantially reduce global disaster mortality by 2030, aiming to lower average per 100,000 global mortality rates in the decade 2020-2030 compared to the period 2005-2015.
- (b) Substantially reduce the number of affected people globally by 2030, aiming to lower average global figure per 100,000 in the decade 2020-2030 compared to the period 2005-2015.
- (c) Reduce direct disaster economic loss in relation to global gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030.
- (d) Substantially reduce disaster damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of basic services, among them health and educational facilities, including through developing their resilience by 2030.
- (e) Substantially increase the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020.
- (f) Substantially enhance international cooperation to developing countries through adequate and sustainable support to complement their national actions for implementation of this Framework by 2030.
- (g) Substantially increase the availability of and access to multi-hazard early warning systems and disaster risk information and assessments to the people by 2030.

These global targets are set into four priorities, namely,

Priority 1. Understanding disaster risk

Disaster risk management should be based on an understanding of disaster risk in all its dimensions of vulnerability, capacity, exposure of persons and assets, hazard characteristics and the environment. Such knowledge can be used for risk assessment, prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response.

Priority 2. Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk

Disaster risk governance at the national, regional and global levels is very important for prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery, and rehabilitation. It fosters collaboration and partnership.

Priority 3. Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience

Public and private investment in disaster risk prevention and reduction through structural and non-structural measures are essential to enhance the economic, social, health and cultural resilience of persons, communities, countries and their assets, as well as the environment.

Priority 4. *Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction*

The growth of disaster risk means there is a need to strengthen disaster preparedness for response, take action in anticipation of events, and ensure capacities are in place for effective response and recovery at all levels. The recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction phase are a critical opportunity to build back better, including through integrating disaster risk reduction into development measures⁷.

Understanding the Development Perspective from SDG Framework for the Commonwealth

Fifty-two countries are members of the Commonwealth, spread over Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Pacific. The member

countries are diverse with the world's largest, smallest, richest and poorest countries. Thirty-one of the members are classified as small states – countries with a population size of 1.5 million people or less. All members subscribe to the Commonwealth's values and principles outlined in The Commonwealth Charter. All members have an equal say – regardless of size or economic stature. This ensures even the smallest member countries have a voice in shaping the Commonwealth.

According to World Bank Atlas for sustainable development goals ⁸, between 1990 and 2013 nearly one billion people were raised out of extreme poverty. Eliminating poverty is certainly possible requiring sustained growth and reducing inequality. Undernourishment and stunting have been nearly halved since 1990, despite increasing food loss, while the burden of infectious disease has also declined. Access to water has expanded, but progress on sanitation has been slower. For too many people, access to healthcare and education still depends on personal financial means.

Unfortunately, the environmental cost of growth has been high. Accumulated damage to oceanic and terrestrial ecosystems is considerable and does not seem to reduce but increase with newer challenges such as dealing with microplastic pollution in the seas. But hopeful signs exist, while greenhouse gas emissions are at record levels, so too is renewable energy capacity.

Though the physical infrastructure continues to expand, the population is also growing with urbanization posing a major challenge.

The following table highlights national actions by members of the Commonwealth countries towards achieving the SDGs based on their VNRs submitted to the HLPF⁹. Few more countries are expected to submit their VNRs during the coming months.

Country	SDG-related actions
Bangladesh	<p>Integrated the 2030 Agenda in its 7th Five Year Plan (2016-2020).</p> <p>The Government has adopted “Whole of Society” approach to ensure wider participation of NGOs, development partners, private sector, media and CSOs in the process of formulation of the Action Plan and implementation of the SDGs.</p> <p>To spearhead the process, ‘SDGs Implementation and Monitoring Committee’ has been formed at the Prime Minister’s Office to facilitate and implementation of SDGs Action Plan.</p> <p>Bangladesh has data for 70 indicators and partially available data for 108 indicators but need to devise new mechanism for data mining for the remaining 63 indicators.</p>
Belize	<p>“Horizon 2030: National Development Framework for Belize 2010-2030” now guides long-term development planning. The strategic priorities for Belize by the year 2030 includes democratic governance for effective public administration and sustainable development; education; economic resilience and a healthy citizenry and environment.</p> <p>Building on this long-term development plan and to guide the implementation of the SDGs the “Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS) 2016-2020” was adopted.</p> <p>Priority SDGs are SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 14 on life below water.</p> <p>In line with five Critical Success Factors of the GSDS, five Technical Committees are being established to ensure systemic integration: a) Optimal National Income and Investment Committee, b) Social Cohesion and Resilience Committee, c) Natural Environmental, Historical and Cultural Assets Committee, d) Governance and e) Citizen Security Committee.</p> <p>The Economic and Sustainable Development Council, a senior leadership advisory body appointed by the Prime Minister, provides input on priorities and implementation.</p>

<p>Botswana</p>	<p>Botswana underwent a lengthy consultation process in the development of its national Vision 2036 (2017-2036), National Development Plan 11 (2017- 2023) – and the associated District and Urban Development Plans, to ensure that these key documents were aligned to the SDGs.</p> <p>The stated national priorities of NDP 11 mirror those of Vision 2036 and very closely relate to the SDG agenda.</p> <p>The SDG rollout process will be further supported by four Thematic Working Groups (TWGs). These are (i) Economy and Employment, (ii) Social Upliftment, (iii) Sustainable Environment, and (iv) Governance, Safety and Security.</p> <p>The country managed to reduce its head count poverty rate from 47 percent in 1993 to 30.6 percent 2002/3 and further down to 19.3 percent in 2009/10</p> <p>Botswana’s Gini coefficient decreased from 64.7 to 60.9 during the same period, but remains high. Botswana’s shared prosperity rate, measured by the growth rate of the per capita consumption level of lowest 40th percentile of the population, stands at 4.9 percent, above the global median of 3.9 percent, and higher than those of South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Lesotho and Mauritius.</p>
<p>India</p>	<p>The expression “<i>Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas</i>,” which translates as “Collective Effort, Inclusive Growth” forms the cornerstone of India’s national development agenda.</p> <p>A noteworthy example of a crosscutting initiative is the <i>Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana</i> (PMJDY) which is the world’s largest financial inclusion programme.</p> <p>Further, special efforts have been made to invigorate the federal governance structure of the country through cooperative and competitive federalism. State Governments are playing a prominent role in advancing the national development agenda.</p> <p>The reforms have included fiscal consolidation, inflation targeting, improved governance all around, accelerated infrastructure development (SDG 9), curbing of corruption (SDG 16), Aadhaar Act,</p>

Insolvency and Bankruptcy Act, Goods and Services Tax (GST), further liberalization of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), closure of sick public-sector Units and much more. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which is sometimes described as the world's largest cash transfer programme, has generated over 2 billion person-days' of employment (SDG 8) during the last year. The *Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana*-National Livelihoods Mission provides skilled employment to marginalized communities.

Programmes under the National Food Security Act cover more than 800 million people in the country. The Public Distribution System, for instance, is one of the largest food security initiatives in the world.

The National Health Policy, 2017, specifies targets for universalizing primary health care, reducing infant and under-5 mortality, preventing premature deaths due to noncommunicable diseases as well as increasing Government expenditure on health.

Significant progress has been made with respect to preservation and management of the marine ecosystem. For instance, the Coastal Ocean Monitoring and Prediction System tracks the levels of marine pollution along the coastline. Additionally, the Online Oil Spill Advisory System enhances the effectiveness of the national response to marine oil spills. India is also implementing the revised National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan.

Financing of sustainable sources of energy is being promoted to provide energy for all by 2022 through a massive 150 GW increase in energy from renewables. Enhanced international cooperation is also being fostered through the leadership of the International Solar Alliance.

Further, consistent policies have opened up the economy to FDI. This has resulted in \$156 billion FDI flow during the last three fiscal years. The flow of \$56 billion in the latest fiscal year has been larger than that in any other year.

<p>Kenya</p>	<p>By the time the SDGs were adopted, the second Medium Term Programme (2013-2017) (MTP) was in its third year of implementation. The process of the preparation of the third MTP (2018- 2022) and the second-generation County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) is ongoing in which SDGs and Africa Agenda 2063 will be mainstreamed.</p> <p>The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics has undertaken an indicator mapping and identified 128 indicators out of the 230 global indicators that can be measured with the available data or data that can be produced within 1-2 years with minimum effort.</p> <p>The Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company has installed water ATMs enabling city residents living in informal settlements to access quality water cheaply. The ATMs use AQtap technology and the residents pay for water using mobile technology.</p> <p>National actions to achieving SDGs include, include the National Government Constituency Development Fund (NGCDF); the Hunger and Safety Net Programme (HSNP); Subsidized Basic Education; Empowerment funds targeting vulnerable groups; preference and reservation of 30% in public procurement to vulnerable groups; Establishment of Huduma centres to facilitate access to various Public Services and information using a One-Stop Shop concept; harnessing digital technologies for financial inclusion (mobile money transfer) and development of Public Participation guidelines.</p>
<p>Malaysia</p>	<p>Malaysia is not starting anew on its pathway to sustainable development but it is a process already in motion. Some of the achievements to date are as below:</p> <p>SDG 1&2: Absolute poverty reduced from 49.3% (1970) to 0.6% (2014) with no reported cases of hunger;</p> <p>SDG 4&5: More than 90% enrolment rates for primary and secondary school levels for both boys and girls and 33% for higher education with gender ratio slightly in favour of girls;</p> <p>SDG 6: Over 95% coverage for water and sanitation, and electricity supply at national level;</p> <p>SDG 8: Full employment since 1992;</p>

	<p>SDG 10: Income inequalities reduced, as indicated by lower Gini Coefficient from 0.513 (1970) to 0.401 (2014); and</p> <p>SDG 13, 14, 15, & 17: As of 2015, maintained more than 50% forest cover, 10.76% as terrestrial protected areas and 1.06% as marine protected areas. Carbon intensity reduced by 33% since 2009, increasing renewable energy capacity.</p>
Nigeria	<p>An Inter-Ministerial Committee on the SDGs has been established and operational guidelines for the same developed to guide the coordinated engagement with Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). Similar structures being established at the sub-national (State) level.</p> <p>Two select committees on SDGs have been established in the Senate and House of Representatives.</p> <p>Identifying and targeting the poor and vulnerable people has been achieved through establishment of a "National Social Register" for poor and vulnerable households.</p> <p>There is a monthly conditional cash transfer of five thousand naira (N5,000) to such households as part of a national social safety net programme.</p>
Cyprus	<p>Formulation and implementation of an integrated strategy in the tourism sector, extension of the maritime sector and infrastructure and modernization of the professional services sector, which relate primarily with SDGs 8 and 9, but also with SDGs 12 and 14 has been completed and being implemented.</p> <p>Promotion of green development and creation of green jobs. Investing in waste management, greenhouse gas reduction, recycling and adaptation to climate change</p> <p>the new integrated industrial strategy will take into account policies such as the Smart Specialization Strategy, the Action Plan of the National Coalition for Digital Jobs, the National Digital Strategy, the National Policy Statement for the Enhancement of the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Cyprus.</p> <p>The National Youth Strategy (NYS) of Cyprus for the period 2017-2022 defines, for the first time, the vision of the state for its young people. It is the government's commitment to implement actions that guarantee quality of life and offer new opportunities for all the young people in Cyprus.</p>

The information provided by countries during the HLPF meetings, through the VNRs, clearly indicate the following:

- The number of countries ready to report on national actions are still limited.
- The nature and kind of information presented in the VNRs indicate approaches by various governments that are keen to adjust their ongoing and current action plans and programmes to contribute to SDGs, with few initiatives that are designed for specific SDGs.
- Lack of suggestive and/or indicative reporting format and details thereof will be a challenge to consolidate the reviews in terms of identifying impacts of actions towards achieving the SDGs.
- With HLPF mandated to merely ‘hear’ the reports from member states, the ability to have a serious discussion on how countries and regions can consolidate actions seem to be limited which will have impact in the coming years to identify options for sharing expertise and experiences, and
- The nature of agenda setting during the HLPF will make it hard for timely reviews since each of the SDG-centred agenda will be coming for discussion perhaps twice at the most during the life of current SDG timelines (currently the HLPF intends to discuss not more than 4-5 SDG related actions for review and discussion in its annual meetings that will need a minimum of 4-year cycle for one review of all SDGs and with 14- year time horizon, the reviews can happen no more than twice).

Charting a Roadmap to deal with SDGs

The former Prime Minister of Malta, Dr. Lawrence Gonzi during the Roundtable organized in conjunction with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2015 cited the proceedings of a Conference organized by the Royal Commonwealth Society in 2013 where he quoted Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Former Foreign Secretary, UK) who argued that:

The EU and Commonwealth are two utterly different creatures, and they're meant to be different. The Commonwealth is a body of countries with certain shared backgrounds, a common language, common values, and it seeks to reach common positions via discussion on issues of interest. However, the Commonwealth doesn't aspire to go much beyond discussion, while the EU is concerned more with power”.

The point that the Commonwealth does not aspire to go much beyond discussion needs some focus now while the ‘family of nations’ prepare for the forthcoming CHOGM meeting in 2018.

In order to go beyond discussions at the forthcoming CHOGM 2018 meeting, member states need to focus on the following five key elements in order to achieving the SDGs.

- Identifying the gaps in reviewing and reporting national actions related to SDGs and subsequent reporting at HLPF meetings;
- Drawing up an integrated framework of actions that combine the commitments and priorities related to the Paris Agreement, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Sendai Framework and the SAMOA Pathway;
- Suggest nationally-led actions to realize specific SDGs;
- Chart specific collaborative actions that focus on data, science and technology, education and capacity building as well as other cross-cutting issues; and
- Develop a ‘Commonwealth led Strategic Communication Plan’ (CSCP) to spread the ownership on SDGs as well as reach out to people in the countries on their role and responsibilities to deliver on SDGs.

Elaboration of Key Elements

Dealing with reporting on SDG related and SDG led actions

The CHOGM 2018 can provide opportunities for some uncommon

issues within the ambit of Commonwealth, that has relevance to several countries in the region. These include options to deal with realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where in the currently unclear mandate and effectiveness of the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) can be strengthened by focusing on issues such as better ways and formats for voluntary national reviews (VNRs), better means to implement SDG 17 on partnerships where actions thus far on realizing the Goal will be discussed during HLPF 2018.

The Commonwealth countries could potentially suggest the HLPF to discuss a robust review mechanism for SDGs so that support needed for SIDS and developing countries could be better tracked and enhanced.

In order to do this, the suggested voluntary guidelines for VNRs at the HLPF can be used as a starting point, especially on issues of methodology and key points for consideration by the review¹⁰.

One key point raised both in the VNRs and during the discussions at HLPF 2016 and 2017 has been that of need for support to deal with data and information. This is an issue that is particularly relevant for many countries within the family of Commonwealth countries where national capacities of statistical offices that compile data and information for assessment of action need attention.

The CHOGM 2018 meeting could potentially establish a facilitating network of experts and institutions who can help member states to develop capacities to data collection, mining and assessments as well as use big data analytics to look at impacts of actions.

Additionally, focus on environment related actions are clearly lacking in majority of the VNRs. This is a concern since about 84 indicators related to SDGs are centred directly around environment. The CHOGM 2018 meeting could suggest enhanced review and reporting of actions related to environment. In fact, the Commonwealth did lead such discussions with regard to impact of climate change through a commissioned report in 1989 that led to further discussions in the run up

to adopting the UNFCCC. It will be appropriate for the Commonwealth to commission such a report on recommitting countries to secure the Planet's environment in light of disconnected discussions and decisions on development in several countries.

Drawing up an integrated framework of actions

While the focus on SDGs is important, the CHOGM 2018 should also focus on linking actions, using the common but differentiated responsibility framework, to other multilateral agreements such as the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, Samoa Pathway, the Climate Agenda and using the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.

In addition, partnerships and programmes established to support SDGs such as the Global Partnership with Sustainable Development Data, the Global Partnership on Marine Litter, the International Solar Alliance, the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, the Decent Jobs for Youth Platform, the commitment framework from the Oceans Conference also need to be considered as components for drawing up national and Commonwealth level initiatives in support of achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.

These are in addition to the current issues that need integration such as actions to trade, security and the related that traditionally have received attention at the level of Commonwealth.

Options to develop nationally-led actions for specific SDGs

The Commonwealth countries can also discuss possibilities for a common framework to implement SDGs across commonwealth by countries leading actions on specific SDGs, such as India on strengthening local self-governance, Malaysia on SDG 4 related to education, Bangladesh on SDG 13 related to climate action and disaster preparedness, Fiji supporting actions related to SDG 14 on oceans, Samoa on SDG 11 and 13 and others.

Such nationally led actions by the member states could forge a stronger Commonwealth, enhance options for focused support for specific action across members states reducing costs and increasing cooperation. Such national initiatives supporting countries across Commonwealth will enhance the voice of the family of nations.

In addition, such programmes can give rise to specialised institutions that can support countries in need of capacities to deal with investment-initiatives such as big data analytics, education, environmental monitoring and others.

Specific collaborations

While all of these are important issues for Commonwealth countries, environment related issues are in many aspects ignored thus far at CHOGM events. This needs to be corrected now.

With initiatives such as designing the post 2020 global biodiversity strategic plan, reducing the use of micro-plastics in a range of consumer durables (akin to initiative like the Montreal Protocol on eliminating green-house emitting gases), supporting actions to reduce forest destruction and degradation, communicating development, strengthening science-policy-practice linkages to achieve the SDGs, data economics, enhancing local governance, supporting local livelihoods based on co-benefits, scaling up circular and green economy actions are all opportunities available before the Commonwealth to be explored and acted upon.

Each of the member state in the Commonwealth has something unique to offer – ranging from India to support digital transformation to Fiji to strengthen the blue economy. It will be appropriate for the CHOGM 2018 to consider such strengths and work on scaling up, replicating and assessing such strengths and actions.

Commonwealth Strategic Communication Plan (CSCP)

While Commonwealth countries bring together significant opportunities to influence global agenda on development action, there is still no

concrete action to communicate the plans and initiatives. This makes the visibility and voice of the group weak and at times muted.

While the Commonwealth has led global efforts in designing initiatives such as the Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative (HIPC), setting the global climate agenda, suggesting options to deal with global trade agenda through the Velletra Statement on Multilateral Trade, there is very poor visibility of these initiatives in the public domain.

Unless member states begin owning the group to consolidate and impact global development agenda, the words of Sir Malcolm Rifkind, quoted above, will come to the true.

In order to consolidate its influence and reach, the CHOGM 2018 could consider initiating a Commonwealth level communication plan to deal with strategic issues, supporting its actions for better reach and influence.

Conclusions

Sustainable development can only be managed if one uses the “Plan, Do, Check, Improve” cycle of management. With focus on interrelated objectives and actions spanning environmental, economic and social considerations, the objectives should be to uses an intergenerational time frame.

For this, countries need to use a range of options and techniques including cost-benefit analysis, multi-criterial analysis that integrates social, economic and environmental considerations that are supported by foresight analysis, transition management, modelling for decades based on reliable science, evidence-based information and appropriate indicators.

Driven by technological advances and increasing global integration, the strong economic growth in several parts of the world has managed to expand World GDP to the extent the estimates are around 75% expansion between 1995-2020. This has inevitably brought pressure on social and

environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Challenges such as climate change and terrorism has no geo-political boundaries now necessitating new partnerships and strengthening existing ones. In this context, time has come for the Commonwealth countries to move from focusing on a ‘feel good’ outcome to a ‘do good’ outcome through its programmes and actions.

Key challenge to sustainable development is the ability to measure progress being made. Though the SDG framework provides operational guidelines, the satisfaction of future needs or the impacts of current actions poses a measurement related challenge. The transitional dimension of key threats as well as opportunities for sustainable development makes monitoring a challenge. It is time for countries to clearly define their ‘needs’ and a clear barometer to measure whether these ‘needs’ are being met.

While CHOGM 2018 need to focus on some immediate agenda issues such as increasing security, doubling efforts to collaborate and cooperate on issues such as trade, economic resilience and others, it cannot be myopic to the opportunity to initiate a dialogue on measuring sustainability, as relevant to individual countries or groups using a set of metrics.

For this, the Commonwealth needs to harness the strength of current data based decision making combined with a foresight analysis that will enhance the options for well-rounded development that is relevant, responsive and resilient. CHOGM 2018 is an opportunity to put in place such initiatives for development that goes beyond 2030.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Source: Fast Facts: The Commonwealth. A Briefing for journalists, 15 January 2018. Commonwealth Secretariat.*
- ² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>
- ³ http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/299
- ⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/international/negotiations/paris_en

- ⁵ <http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffd3/press-release/countries-reach-historic-agreement.html>
- ⁶ <https://www.preventionweb.net/english/professional/policies/v.php?id=39483>
- ⁷ <http://www.unisdr.org/we/coordinate/sendai-framework>
- ⁸ “World Bank. 2017. *Atlas of Sustainable Development Goals 2017 : From World Development Indicators. World Bank Atlas;. Washington, DC: World Bank. © World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/26306 License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.*”
- ⁹ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17109Synthesis_Report_VNRs_2017.pdf
- ¹⁰ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11819Voluntary_guidelines_VNRs.pdf

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