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The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London, April 2018

With the theme “Towards a common future”, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting was held in London from April 16th to 20th 2018. Before the discussions at the end of the week, three days were devoted to various events including forums for ‘people’, ‘business’, ‘women’ and ‘youth’. This issue of CHECPoints examines the main outcomes of the deliberations into which were fed the findings of the four forums all of which CHEC representatives attended. A brief summary of key issues from the leader’s meeting and the final CHOGM communiqué is set out immediately below, with the impressions of the Forums from the CHEC representatives later.

At the summit, leaders came together to focus on:

- a more sustainable future:
- a fairer future:
- a more secure future:
- a more prosperous future:

OUTCOMES FROM THE HEADS OF GOVERNMENTS

The statement contains the following:

“Our Communiqué adopted today, sets out the specific commitments we have made collectively to deal with those challenges. These include, strengthening democratic institutions and building peace; promoting gender equality and inclusion; action on climate change and oceans; sustainable use of resources; commitment to the Chemical Weapons Convention; preventing and countering violent extremism and human trafficking.

“We recognise the threat of climate change on the world but in particular the existential threat to Small Island Developing States (SIDs). We also recognise the need for a paradigm shift to urgently facilitate pre and post resilience building”. (Read the full statement at:

<http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/LeadersStatement.pdf>)

Paragraph 2 of the CHOGM communiqué reads: “Heads affirmed their unwavering commitment to the Commonwealth’s Fundamental Political Values, reflected in the Commonwealth Charter. They recalled the Commonwealth’s proud history of acting to strengthen good governance and the rule of law, to protect and promote democratic principles and human rights, to promote peace and security and to strengthen democratic institutions. They emphasised that the full social, economic and political participation of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status, is essential for democracy and sustainable development to thrive. Heads also acknowledged the role of civil society organisations, including women’s rights’ organisations, in this context”. (Read the full communiqué at: <http://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/commonwealth-heads-government-meeting-communiqué-towards-common-future>).

A highly stimulating background report with authoritative statements by Prime Ministers and key people international organisations was prepared by the Royal Commonwealth Society: <https://thercs.org/assets/Publications/CHOGM-2018-Report-v2-Low-res.pdf>

THE FORUMS

The four Forums (Commonwealth People’s Forum; Commonwealth Business Forum; Commonwealth Youth Forum and the Commonwealth Women’s Forum) offered an opportunity for Commonwealth dialogue and provide a platform for wider debate of some of the key issues and challenges, in advance of discussions by leaders at CHOGM. For the first time, the four

Commonwealth Forums were held in the same venue, coming together to discuss shared agendas, forge important new partnerships and celebrate common interests.

The People's Forum Declaration and Call to Action argue that Commonwealth renewal is no longer an option, but an achievable imperative. Civic voices concluded: *'We stand at the threshold of a new Commonwealth future, built on equality, diversity, a constant questioning, and interrogation of the constraints and challenges that face us and the opportunities, strengths and values that unite us as human beings with shared stories. We will achieve this through common effort, shared experience, action with vision and imagination, and by building inclusive, participatory, responsive and accountable systems of governance that leave no-one behind.'*

The Commonwealth Foundation recognized that in these perilous times, now more than ever civic voice matters. With a buoyant optimism, the Foundation will persist with its commitment to support the call for the renewal of the Commonwealth for the interests of civic voices.

Reports from the Women's forum, the Youth Forum and the Peoples Forum are available to download:

Women:

<http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Commonwealth%20Women%20%27s%20Forum%20-%20Outcome%20Statement%20-%20April%202018.pdf>

Youth:

http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/CYF_2018_Declaration_with%20annexe%20_action%20plan.pdf

People:

<https://commonwealthfoundation.com/resource/people-forum-2018-call-action-declaration/>

Of particular interest to the CHEC community is the Commonwealth Blue Charter (on the oceans):

<http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Commonwealth%20Women%20%27s%20Forum%20-%20Outcome%20Statement%20-%20April%202018.pdf>

Mark Robinson suggests that this is an area where CHEC can be active if it so chooses and much thought needs to be given as to how we can both get involved and encourage the development of partnerships. A heavy emphasis seems to have been placed on ocean

governance. Heads recognised under "implementation" the need to move from words to actions.

Other important statements that emanated from the meeting included:

The "Declaration on the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment":

http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/DeclarationontheCommonwealthConnectivityAgendaforTradeandInvestment_0.pdf

"Revised Commonwealth Guidelines for the Conduct of Election Observation in Member Countries".

http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/CommonwealthGuidelinesfortheConductofElectionObservationinMemberCountries_1.pdf

Civil society organisations picked up points of concern to them. For example, BOND selected the following issues as significant: tackling plastic waste, disaster reduction, trade, eliminating blindness, supporting girls and tackling malaria, partly because the UK Government announced additional aid funding on those themes at the time of CHOGM. The IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Federation) noted the CHOGM statement emphasizing commitments to mainstreaming gender in policies and institutions and towards the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) and a stronger action to prevent and eliminate sexual and gender-based violence; child, early and forced marriage; and female genital mutilation. However, IPPF stressed the need for converting the rhetoric commitments into practice by systematic overlap of these plans with aid and development assistance. The leaders themselves called for greater funding for the activities of the Commonwealth Secretariat.



Audience at the peoples Forum

CHEC'S REACTIONS TO THE FOUR FORUMS

THE BUSINESS FORUM

Mark Robinson wrote that "The Business Forum was held in the splendour of the Guildhall and opened by the Prime Minister who made a sound but cautious speech. Following the Business Forum opening a very convivial lunch party was held and I came away with the impression that the event was geared to networking rather than the production of earnest statements. The interim communique and its overarching theme *"Delivering a More Prosperous Commonwealth for All"* seems to reflect that. It focused on Plenary Sessions interspersed with panel discussions led by expert moderators rather than a "succession of prepared, unchallenged speeches" There were also smaller roundtables ensuring relevant but diverse participation. I found I was spoilt for choice in what I could sit in on, but I was able to bump into and network many former colleagues from my five years in the City, many of whom had great commercial experience in Africa and the Far East".

"On the first day the future of trade was the centre point for discussion and there was much emphasis on trade, examining whether the Commonwealth could do more to help countries work together, to navigate the challenges brought about by advancing technologies and globalisation. Reinforcing trust between business and the community was at the heart of that discussion".

"On day two parallel events were held at the QEII Centre and at the Mansion House, although I based myself at the former".

"Day three was devoted to the importance and future of leadership, with roundtables bringing together government and business leaders from Africa, Asia and small island states. The success of the Commonwealth Games in Queensland, Australia was also celebrated".

"At lunchtime on day two, I was invited to a reception at the headquarters of the Telegraph Group in Victoria hosted by Lord (Guy) Black of Brentwood, Executive Director of the Telegraph Media Group. He is also Chairman of the Commonwealth Press Union Media Trust. The purpose was to hand over the 2018 Astor Press Freedom Award to an individual or organisation that has made an outstanding contribution to press freedom in the Commonwealth. On this occasion it was

awarded posthumously to Daphne Caruana Galizia, an investigative journalist killed by a car bomb in Malta in October 2017 aged 53. The award was presented to her sons Matthew and Paul during CHOGM at this well attended event".

"On day three, Baroness Stern hosted a reception on the terrace of the House of Lords to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI). It was well attended. There was also a special event on the Friday evening at the National Liberal Club prior to CHOGM to launch CHRI's 2018 report. I believe CHRI made its presence felt at CHOGM but was discussed only in hushed terms".

THE PEOPLE'S FORUM

The Forum's closing statement included the sentence: "We stand at the threshold of a new Commonwealth future, built on equality, diversity, a constant questioning, and interrogation of the constraints and challenges that face us and the opportunities, strengths and values that unit us as human beings with shared stories". It summed up the ideas and feelings that emerged from open debate among 350 people from all parts of the Commonwealth across themes and issues such as migration; accessing justice; climate justice; LGBT and indigenous people's rights, the need to change old colonial rules; and how to hold power accountable.



Ben Okri giving his opening address

A series of skilled, dynamic and committed writers, activists and practitioners gave challenging speeches following the opening keynote address by Ben Okri which can be viewed at:

<https://commonwealthfoundation.com/blog/ben-okris-keynote/>.

CHEC's Honorary Secretary, Eva Ekehorn was inspired by Ben Okri's opening address, on the theme "Ending

exclusion: a path to renewal”, being positive which was full of poetry and encouraging talk about looking forward. People are not aware of the power that they have, individual and collectively.

She and John McDonnell, CHEC’s intern, were impressed by the discussions on injustice; issues of historic and current colonialism and the extent to which indigenous peoples are excluded from governance were raised. Among present-day concerns facing indigenous peoples were the position of indigenous peoples in many of the larger, wealthier Commonwealth countries; the way many countries still retained laws from more than 100 years ago that denied rights to certain groups on the basis of gender, race and social status; and the

question of self-determination, including the ability of indigenous people to satisfy their own socio-economic and cultural needs. The old laws from colonial times needed to be changed to meet world standards of human rights.

Migration was another major theme, from the problems of the Windrush generation migrants in the UK, to those of migrant South Asian worked in the Gulf States and refugees from civil conflict and wars in African countries. Both national and local governments have much to do to help both newcomers and returning migrants and to avoid the draconian interpretation of laws and use of detention that break-up families and blight the lives of mothers and children.

The 13 Key Policy Areas covered by the 2018 Commonwealth People’s Forum Declaration and Call to Action

1. Removing colonial-era laws
2. Accessing Justice
3. Right of indigenous peoples
4. Women negotiating peace
5. Migration
6. People-centered health and education
7. Climate justice
8. Just world order and just economies
9. A digital age that enables, but also protects, the peoples of the Commonwealth
10. Separation of powers, law-making, judiciary, and financial; national, regional and local
11. Accountability in development
12. Decentralisation of power
13. Media accountability

The theme climate justice emphasized the contrasts in vulnerability to environmental change across the Commonwealth and led to calls for international fairness in resources for adaptation to climate change. Small Island States and low-lying coastal regions are often particularly vulnerable meaning that many people face migration from increased risk of flooding and storm surges. In the past, as a speaker from Kiribati emphasized, actions of a colonial power had forced older generations to move, in her case because of nuclear testing. Today, the same people, now elderly, may have to move again because of rising sea levels.

Donnell Davis, a CHEC Governing Board Member from Australia, joined Eva Ekehorn, Mark Robinson and John McDonnell at the joint session of all four Forums on “Towards a Common Future” which had a high-status panel.

In her opening address, Patricia Scotland reminded people of the words of Nelson Mandela: “Vision without action is just a dream, action without vision just passes the time, and vision with action can change the world.” She then said “This is what we are doing together now: changing the world. And our Commonwealth, our one third of the world can, if we choose, lead the way for a

common future not just for our Commonwealth but for everyone". Her address is available at: http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/20180417_SGremarksCwForumsJointPlenary.pdf In his keynote address Bill Gates said: "One of the ways to make progress, if you want to do something better, is find out who is already doing it better than anyone else in the world and adopt what they are doing to your own challenges. The Commonwealth is ideal for this. You meet regularly to learn from one another." He addressed the fact that 60 per cent of Commonwealth citizens are aged 29 or under by saying: "Today the entrepreneurs driving start-ups from Johannesburg and Nairobi to New Delhi are young in age and outlook. The thousands of businesses they are creating are already remaking the future." He talked about the work the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and many others have done in trying to eradicate polio: by 2014 India became polio free; in 2017 Nigeria was free and Pakistan had just a few cases. He urged the Commonwealth countries to do more to eradicate malaria- something that the Heads of Governments later agreed to: halving malaria by 2023.

UK Prime Minister Theresa May was livelier than she had been at the Business Forum, and had clearly reserved her fire power for this bigger occasion. She said she was committed to a more sustainable Commonwealth, and praised the Blue Charter setting out the principles to sustainably protect the oceans that was agreed by the Heads of Governments later in the week. She also apologized for Britain's role in introducing anti-LGBT laws into many Commonwealth countries during colonialism.

Prime Minister of Jamaica Andrew Holness stressed the importance of tackling climate change. He said, "The Issue of climate change is not a philosophical one, and we don't have time to defend the credibility of whether or not it is real or fake. It is an existential threat for the small island states, many of whom are part of our Commonwealth".

In the session generally, the role of youth was stressed, people arguing that progress is not inevitable: it needs to be led by the diligence of youth. Youth leadership is shown in sports where people learn about access to funds; discipline and structure; honesty and integrity; hard work and teamwork; the prevention of non-communicable diseases, particularly obesity. However,

Donnell Davis points out that the elephant in the room for all countries, not just the small island states, was the existential threat of climate change which concerns all peoples and is already affecting the quality of life people enjoy. While indigenous and disadvantaged people may often be the most vulnerable, people everywhere may be affected, not only directly, but also indirectly through food and water supplies, disruption of communications, and changes in disease distribution. However, climate change is not just a health matter; it is an issue of international governance, shared responsibility and equitable support for mitigation and adaptation.

THE WOMEN'S FORUM

The Women's Forum was an enthusiastic collaboration of a diverse cross-section of women, some men and some LGBTI discussing equality and the role of women in a better future for all. General themes presented were: leadership, peace and security, education to empower, economic empowerment and community empowerment. Speakers and moderators included many Prime Ministers and Presidents from across the Commonwealth, former Prime Ministers, the Heads of the World Bank and the International Labour Organization (ILO), professors and leaders of outstanding civil society organizations. The insights and personal conviction of each of these people added greatly to the understanding of the forum participants. Donnell Davis found the Women's Forum to be honest, brave, forthright and enlightening, with many enthusiastic participants staying on to refine the draft resolutions after the meeting closed.

Every country in the Commonwealth has at least one piece of legislation that directly discriminates against women. The Women's Forum called for all Heads of Government to review their legal frameworks to eliminate such discrimination, as a preliminary to changing such attitudes inside respective cultures.

Donnell Davis wishes to report her insights on the issues. She writes "Although I have been an advocate since 1976 (either as a rural girl seeking tertiary education; a domestic violence survivor; policy analyst; equity legislation draftsman; and a professional and community advocate) I learnt more about the concerns and contemporary obstacles for girls and women in the Commonwealth of 53 nations. Although we hear snippets on the news, we cannot appreciate the

problems facing others, nor the innovative solutions that younger women are advancing, without hearing personal stories of trials and new-found freedoms.” Donnell continues “Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 was the focus for the forum, but all other SDGs wove their way into our conversations and resolutions. Patricia Scotland shared her mother’s advice: ‘We wouldn’t let a man do anything else by himself, so why would we let men run the world?’”

“However, she encouraged us to hug our good men along our journey, and to invest time into shaping our boys into good men. This inclusive attitude reinforces the idea that when women have a voice, the community’s needs are heard. When women have financial security, everybody benefits. When women are given a representative voice in the development of cities, education systems, banking reforms, holistic health plans or peace negotiations, then a more nuanced approach to problem solving paves the path for more inclusive long-term solutions”.



Donnell points out that: “We need to be mindful that 76% of the Commonwealth population is under 30 years old. The Commonwealth is an excellent microcosm for changing the world for the better. Some of its countries have both Westminster and traditional governance, where some practice child marriage, FGM, limited education for the girl child, death penalty to gay men and no legal rights for women on land tenure or decision-making for their family. Thus, while some countries are arguing about subtle words in legislation, others fail to honour the basic tenets of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights”. Despite these differences, Donnell recognized the great value of the Commonwealth as a body in which “Each country has (1) an equal voice in discussions; (2) access to best practices for human development; (3) shared legal advice and electoral oversight; and (4) shared research, professional expertise, and educational experience”.

A significant observation at the Women’s Forum was that where women were involved in decision-making and in all cases where women are in political leadership, the plight of the girl child was significantly alleviated. Educational improvements alone, through (1) free education of scholarships; (2) safety and sanitation at school; and (3) second chance education allowing young mothers to attend school with free child care, create a multiplier effect that improves economic conditions for the whole community. Education for girls through to year 12, with free school meals, text books and investment in High quality teacher training for increases the economic multiplier. Bank loans for women, a Women’s Bank or village bank, help provide pathways to financial security and eventually community prosperity.

The huge benefits of women’s active roles in mediation, peacekeeping and eliminating violence were eloquently expressed and fully discussed. Violence has to be considered first because it suppresses improvement in all aspect of quality of life. Violence happens in the home, in the community (either physically or culturally by endorsing bad behaviours) or systemically, or nationally during elections. Sometimes domestic workers suffer violence. Generally their employment conditions are unfair and the Forum called for all countries to endorse the ILO resolution for domestic workers to be recognized, for domestic work to be seen as legitimate work and to prevent unfair, slavery-like working conditions.

Along with this concern about employment came the basic right of access to systems supporting women’s health and reproductive freedom. Among the barriers ate present are the attitudes of older women in many communities, holding back younger family members even if the national laws are being changed. Finally, women are often the most vulnerable people during disasters, being the carers for elders and children, often not having warning systems, and in poor areas particularly, lacking the means to evacuate threatened areas in good time. Following and event, recovery is slowed, if not reversed, by unclean water, food shortages, no sanitation and spread of diseases, such as cholera. Although women can be the best innovators to find sensible solutions, the voices are often ignored. The Forum called for change, making the six key points below.

Commonwealth women are:

- 1) The barometer for healthy societies capable of improving quality of life for all.
- 2) The best contributors to multiplying GDP
- 3) The key to a 50/50 planet as defined by the United Nations (see the brochure: <http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/initiatives/stepitup/stepitup-brochure-en.pdf?la=en&vs=4739>)
- 4) The innovators and early adopters of inclusive reforms
- 5) The keys to finding options for a safer future on the face of climate change
- 6) The instruments to nurture young women and men for a shared future with inclusive, sensitive policies and practices.

THE YOUTH FORUM

John McDonnell attended most of the conference-style events at the Youth Forum and several action-plans and networking sessions, being particularly moved and inspired by a panel event on “Co-creating a more secure future for all”. One of the panelists, Hyppolite Ntigiriwa was a survivor of the Rwandan genocide who subsequently established the Hyppolite for Peace Foundation which promotes the culture of everyday peace. John found the panel event “Enhancing Sustainability in the Commonwealth” stimulating because it dealt with topics close to CHEC’s goals and work. The panel considered how humanity can stay within planetary boundaries, reduce vulnerabilities, and strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards for a sustainable future. The panel included the former New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clarke, who emphasised the importance of youth in making positive changes: “We have the power to change things. We need youth communicating with passion on these important issues”. That theme was emphasized by Prince Harry in the opening session of the Forum when he said: “Sixty per cent of the Commonwealth is under the age of 30 and at 1.4 billion strong, it is you who are going to change the world”. Anna Barker, Chair of the British Youth Council, delivered one of the most popular lines of the session: “We are the power. We are the future. We are the now!” (Her full speech is available at: <http://www.byc.org.uk/blog/speech-powering-our-common-future>).

The session “Building a Prosperous Future for All” concentrated on the issue of youth employment that is

shared by most Commonwealth countries. The panelists engaged in a most interesting discussion on ways of strengthening an enabling environment to promote youth employment throughout the Commonwealth. Floyd Green, the State Minister in Education, Youth and Information in Jamaica explained some the strategies used by the Government of Jamaica to promote youth entrepreneurship. This forward-looking, positive approach enthused participants, convincing them that the commonwealth is in good hands for the future with their passion for making positive change.



HRH Prince Charles greets delegates at the Peoples Forum

THE HEADS OF GOVERNMENT SESSIONS

Mark Robinson reports: “Throughout CHOGM I had what was known as an over pass. This was confined to only one person per Accredited Organisation and was not transferrable as had been the case at other CHOGM’s. This enabled me to obtain special passes for the CHOGM Opening Ceremony at Buckingham Palace, the Secretary-General’s lunchtime reception at St. James’s Palace afterwards, the media tents and press

conferences in the garden of Marlborough House throughout, the delegates lounge also in Marlborough House. I was able to network and lobby to my heart's content and even had the chance to bend Justin Trudeau's ear on the importance of his country resuming support for Commonwealth Scholarships. I was left in no doubt how strongly our small island states felt about the need for positive action on climate change and the need to protect the fish in our oceans upon whom the lives of millions depend. All of this goes to the rationale for CHEC's existence. If there was animated discussion about Brexit I did not hear any of it and in my view it clearly topped nobody's agenda, even if the UK said it did".

"In the two Foreign Ministers meeting's that I attended on Wednesday and Friday morning, there were presentations by Commonwealth luminaries and animated discussion about Commonwealth programmes especially SDGs. The voices of the Small States were heard and well received by the ABC countries. The activities of those close to the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) were noted and came under attack from one or two representatives, but the mandate of the Commonwealth Ministerial action Group was renewed for the next two years with, I hope, a stronger composition than before, namely Australia, Barbados, Belize, Ghana, Kenya, Malaysia, Namibia, Samoa and the United Kingdom".

The Friday session was followed by a buffet lunch to which the accredited organisation's representatives were made to feel not just welcome but could take their lunches to tables in the gardens and sit with whomsoever they wanted and many ministers left with very bent ears. It was there that Boris Johnson told us that he had been absent for the first two morning sessions because he and a group of 10 Foreign Ministers had been meeting the Zimbabwe delegation led by their Foreign Minister, General Moyo, who had led the putsch against Robert Mugabe. They had discussed the forthcoming elections (now set for 30 July), including Commonwealth Election Observation (invitation now submitted to the Secretary-General) and Zimbabwe's likely application to re-join the Commonwealth (now submitted).

Mark continues: "With Carl Wright, I met General Moyo. We discussed the upcoming Zimbabwe

elections. His enthusiasm for Zimbabwe re-joining the Commonwealth after them was palpable".

CONCLUSION

Mark Robinson asks: "So how do we judge CHOGM?" He says: "First and foremost it was well attended with 42 Heads of Government present plus some Prime Ministers who did not fit into that category. 53 Commonwealth Countries were represented. Such a high turnout was something of a record. At the end of the meeting a Leaders' Statement was issued from Windsor Castle and it is worth noting that this said "We are committed to a stronger Commonwealth Secretariat, including through sustainable funding". Given that resources for that organisation have been massively reduced over the last 15 years, this statement could be viewed as something of a contradiction. One of the first tasks over the next two years may be to seek to discover what this strong statement actually means."

The "threat of climate change on the world but in particular the existential threat to Small Island Developing States (SIDs)" was recognised by the Heads. The Communique "Towards a Common Future" was a little disappointing as not much was said about education, despite the major meeting of Education Ministers in Fiji in February 2018.

Finally CHOGM is not just about one meeting. CHOGM 2020 will be in Rwanda and there are fears that the meeting, like that in Sri Lanka, could become embroiled in religious and human rights controversies. In 2022, CHOGM will be held in Samoa and that could present all kinds of logistical problems. There is much work to be done over the next four years.

Pictures from Commonwealth Foundation's website:
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