Commonwealth Secretary-General

Tuesday 9 July 2024

14th Annual Gulf Research Meeting Opening Ceremony
University of Cambridge | 1600 hrs - 1700 hrs

Keynote address by the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC

Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a profound honour to address you today at the 14th Annual Gulf Research meeting here in Cambridge.

In an era marked by unprecedented challenges and rapid global transformations, the imperative for robust international cooperation is unequivocal.

As we gather in this distinguished forum, we are reminded of the pivotal role that international organizations play in sculpting a cooperative global future.

The Commonwealth, an emblem of unity and collaboration, has persistently been at the vanguard of addressing multifaceted global challenges, from peace and security to sustainable development.

With 56 member states and a population exceeding 2.7 billion, the Commonwealth epitomizes the power of collective effort and shared values.

For 75 years, our association has fostered sustainable development, bolstered economic resilience, and delivered environmental stewardship across our diverse membership. The Commonwealth's journey is a testament to the strength derived from unity and the shared commitment to advancing the common good.

This helps us to deliver growth – with economic ties which enable members to trade with each other at 20% lower costs.

Intra-Commonwealth investment has increased by nearly 30% since I took office.

Indeed, pan-Commonwealth trade now stands at 800 million dollars.

This will rise to 1 trillion by 2026, and 2 trillion by 2030.

And it enables us to support our members in times of crisis. Take the recent experience of the Caribbean.

Hurricane Beryl has left a trail of devastation in the Commonwealth countries of Barbados, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Jamaica - resulting in tragic loss of life, extensive damage to property and infrastructure, and severe disruption to the livelihoods of countless individuals.

Relief efforts are underway in each affected country, with the immediate need centring around emergency medical supplies, temporary shelters, clean drinking water and food.

I immediately initiated the Commonwealth's Rapid Response protocols, with teams from the Commonwealth Secretariat, together with our partners, providing active support on the ground.

And we are working together as one family of nations to harness the full strength of the Commonwealth to deliver the maximum possible support for response, relief and reconstruction efforts.

These crises underline the exceptional convergence of hardships which our most vulnerable member states face. The immediate human and economic cost is compounded by their limited fiscal space.

Across our Small Island States, the average Debt to GDP ratio (65%) outweighs the global average (62.5%).

And they are often prevented from accessing the concessional development is critical for the growth of their economies and for cushioning shocks.

With no alternative, countries are often left with no option but to obtain financing on unfavourable terms, resulting in an accumulation of high debt burden, creating a vicious cycle where debt becomes unsustainable and access to finance becomes even more limited.

As a proactive, action-oriented international organisation, we provide them with comprehensive support.

Though our Meridian Programme, we help our members improve debt management, with a combined portfolio of more than 2.5 trillion dollars of public debt under management across 50 countries.

Our Climate Finance Access Hub has unlocked more than 360 million dollars for our most vulnerable members.

Our Blue and Living Lands Charters bring all our member states together to address shared challenges and design shared solutions for land and oceans.

Through our partnership with Cambridge University, we have developed a new tool to derisk climate investments in small island states – enabling them to access more money much faster.

And through our CommonSensing project, we are utilising satellite technology and analysis of geospatial data to empower our vulnerable members: helping them to make informed decisions about climate risks and build resilience.

CommonSensing is a pioneering initiative, which underlines how cutting-edge technology can be harnessed to address pressing global issues.

We are expanding this initiative through the new CommonSpace programme, which explores the potential of space technology to address global challenges, from climate monitoring to disaster management.

By promoting sustainability in space, we aim to harness the immense benefits of space technology for the advancement of all humanity.

CommonSpace represents our commitment to pushing the boundaries of innovation and exploring new frontiers in our quest for sustainable development.

And it underlines the vital importance of understanding, harnessing and mastering new technologies.

Because it is not enough to simply manage the impact of our problems.

It is not enough to simply react to the next challenges.

If that is our approach, we will be locked in an ever-descending spiral.

We must innovate.

We must transcend.

We must build a better future by rediscovering our confidence in humanity's ingenuity, and combining it with the hard-headed strategies which can unleash it.

New technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, cloud computing, internet of things, have become critical to nearly every sector.

They are driving profound changes in our daily lives, changing how we consume, produce and work; how societies connect, and how businesses are run.

By the end of this decade they will have completely transformed our societies and our economies.

The difference between success and failure in the world today, and tomorrow, will reside in the ability of Governments all around the world to understand, master and harness new technologies to drive positive change:

in healthcare;

in education;

in transport & infrastructure;

in governance, trade and justice;

to make our societies more equal, more fair, healthier, more prosperous, more resilient and more secure.

15.7 trillion dollars is expected to be added to the global economy by AI and digitalisation before 2030.

The time to act is now.

So before I leave this office, I am absolutely determined to establish the Commonwealth as definitive world leader in this field;

So that each of our 56 Government have the knowledge, capacity and confidence to capitalise on the extraordinary opportunities technology offers us.

The Commonwealth's collective efforts towards sustainability through these diverse projects are a testament to our unwavering commitment to addressing global challenges.

Our initiatives are not merely projects; they are embodiments of our vision for a future where nations work together in harmony, leveraging their collective strengths to create a better world.

As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the role of international organizations in conflict resolution and the promotion of peace and security becomes ever more critical.

The Commonwealth has long been an advocate for mediation, dialogue, and consensus-building.

Our approach to conflict resolution is rooted in our commitment to diplomacy and practical, actionable solutions.

By fostering dialogue and understanding, and building bridges of understanding and mutual respect, we aim to de-escalate tensions and build lasting peace.

The GCC countries, with their strategic importance and visionary approaches to development, are well-positioned to benefit from and contribute to the wealth of knowledge and experience within the Commonwealth.

By engaging in fruitful collaboration, the GCC can enhance its efforts in sustainable development, economic diversification, and social inclusion.

The Commonwealth stands ready to share its insights and support the GCC in navigating its development path.

Indeed, I hope you will come to see the Commonwealth not only as a friend and ally, but as a partner of choice.

Because the path to a cooperative global future lies in our ability to work together, share knowledge, and support each other in addressing common challenges.

The Commonwealth, with its rich legacy of unity and cooperation, extends its hand in partnership to the GCC and all other international organizations.

Together, we can build a more sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous world for all.

Thank you.