

**Keynote Address by Commonwealth Secretary-General,  
Kamlesh Sharma**

at the

**Second Plenary Session: *Leadership for Climate Resilient  
Green Blue Pacific Economies***

**Pacific Islands Development Forum, Third Summit**

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Your Excellencies

Honourable Ministers,

Distinguished Participants:

I am honoured to be invited to speak today on the theme of '*Leadership for Climate Resilient Green Blue Pacific Economies*'. But I do feel perhaps it is not inappropriate that the Commonwealth should be heard on this subject.

The Commonwealth was the first body whose Heads warned against the critical danger the world faced through global warming, several years before the Rio Conference on Climate Change. It is the organisation which has throughout held as an article of faith that global outcomes must be inclusive, equitable and embrace all human communities irrespective of size and endowment. We have been in the forefront of global advocacy on behalf of small states, and to raising awareness and practical approaches to meet their distinctive needs.

The consequences for Pacific Islands are particularly poignant and unjust. With negligible contribution to the global carbon footprint, they are the first to fall under the shadow of an existential threat. We are therefore faced with an equally

ethical and practical imperative. I have personally seen this in Kiribati and Tuvalu. There is nowhere where the 'Vulnerability-Resilience' Framework pioneered by the Commonwealth is more challenging.

More than half of Commonwealth countries are small land states as islands, but giant ocean states. Being here in Fiji brings a particular awareness of this fact.

As a diverse and worldwide family of nations, we are acutely aware of the impact that both wise and unwise stewardship of marine resources can have on the future well-being of our shared planet. We are also conscious of the contribution well-ordered ocean governance can make towards building environmentally safe, economically resilient and prosperous communities.

However, the oceans, which give us life, are under mounting strain from a variety of uncontrolled uses, which create multiple environmental threats, arising from destructive fishing practices, poorly planned or unregulated coastal development, the dumping of waste, and unsustainable extraction of natural resources. Climate change and extreme environmental episodes add to these pressures.

Rational use of marine resources in terms of economic growth, environmental protection, and community development are vital to our future.

The Commonwealth is working alongside small island states to partner them in managing their marine resources more holistically. This includes offering practical assistance with the delimitation of national maritime boundaries, as well as sustainable management of marine and coastal resources and activities.

Through better protection of key habitats, and the marine ecosystem services they provide, countries can achieve multiple goals including strengthened resilience to the impacts of climate change, better resource protection and more sustainable utilisation of marine living resources which can help meet global food security and local livelihood challenges.

### **Leadership and innovation**

Positive change requires collective thought leadership. This is especially the case with oceans, where exploitation of resources has too often been seen as everyone's right yet nobody's responsibility.

A constant commitment is to boost economic resilience here in the Pacific region and more widely. Many of the challenges Pacific countries face can be partly addressed by adopting a Blue Economy approach, based on key principles of the Green Economy.

The Blue Economy is potentially of value to all Pacific countries through the opportunities it offers to create more value out of existing and new resource streams. Existing benefits and uses can include fisheries, minerals and shipping, while potential benefits include marine fish farming, renewable energy, ocean-related tourism and marine biotechnology.

We have also worked along similar lines with Vanuatu, reporting on the potential for greater coastal habitat protection to mitigate against climate change in Vanuatu, outlined in the *Management of Coastal Carbon Sinks in Vanuatu* report of 2012.

Key challenges to achieving a Blue Economy in the Pacific include lack of capacity, the short-term focus on economic gain when a long term strategy needs to be devised, sustainable sources of finance, poor agreements negotiated by Pacific

Island Countries for access to tuna and other key fishery resources, a lack of 'ownership' among communities of the true value of marine ecosystem services, including an understanding of how they already support livelihoods and a lack of opportunity to increase the value addition from many of the marine resources extracted in the Pacific at a local level.

The Commonwealth is probably the only international organisation to have created a dedicated Oceans and Natural Resources Division, comprising highly skilled economists and legal professionals, who offer comprehensive assistance on the Blue Economy, including in the areas of legislation and policy framework development related to oceans and natural resource management. We are looking towards expanding this work portfolio in Pacific Island Countries, where we are already active.

Recognising the need for a strategic approach to addressing the impact of SIDS vulnerabilities, the Commonwealth has collaborated with the University of Malta and produced a Vulnerability-Resilience Framework. This practical assessment tool identifies gaps within the country's policy environment and helps national, regional and international stakeholders agree on priority areas for developing policy and financial development assistance. The United Nations now works on creating national resilience and vulnerability profiles, acknowledging the contribution of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth Secretariat has been working with a number of Caribbean member countries and with Seychelles in this regard. Using this new Framework, the Commonwealth profiled four Caribbean countries (Barbados, Saint Lucia, Jamaica and Grenada). They were assessed on their vulnerability and resilience status to ensure that policy options for building resilience and development assistance are tailored to the sustainable development needs of these countries. Views were also sought from the public, civil society and private

sectors. The assessment came up with detailed strengths, threats and areas for improvements in the national governance systems, including key considerations for overcoming the challenges and strengthening resilience.

This work has revolutionised the global perception and approach to the peculiar challenges of small states from simply being a more accurate measurement of small states' needs.

Another Commonwealth project, *'Building the Resilience of Small States: A Strategic Vision for 2050'*, provides projections for small states for where they could be in 35 years and beyond. Piloted in the Caribbean region, it offered projections on consumption, debt, and crime which, under the current status quo, would reach further alarming and unsustainable levels by 2050.

Given the projections, the study provided potential solutions and recommendations on how the region's development prospects could be improved in the key areas of citizen security, energy, financing for development, private sector and innovation and youth.

The climate change challenges faced by Commonwealth small states in the Indian Ocean and Pacific will be a key area of focus for the Vision 2050 exercise in this region.

The Commonwealth will be rolling out both of these resilience projects in the Pacific in the next 12 months. We can profit from the work done in other regions to extend our work in the Pacific.

### **Advocacy**

A small state is not a minor country to the Commonwealth – each is a valued member, and every member state of the Commonwealth has an equal voice and equal representation.

This universality has ever been a core Commonwealth conviction.

Two thirds of the world's small states are in the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth has been central in establishing Small States offices in New York and Geneva, with resident experts, from which small states have benefitted from increased opportunities to have their voice heard on an international stage and their interests represented in multilateral negotiations.

The Commonwealth has made a unique contribution in advancing the international awareness of the vulnerabilities of small states, culminating in a steady increase in international awareness of the challenges these countries face and the solutions needed. The President of the World Bank observed that the Commonwealth was distinguished by advocating and exploring solutions and not only reciting the problems which were already known.

### **Collaboration and Partnership**

Major challenges that are common to the region require regional efforts to solve. The Pacific is one of the most vulnerable regions to the effects of climate change, with a number of low-lying small islands under siege from rising sea levels. There is therefore an urgent need for world leaders to find a political solution to climate change and secure meaningful commitments to cut emissions in the Paris COP-21 Conference.

Through harnessing the latest digital technology, initiatives such as the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, to be launched by the Malta Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting this November, will allow countries and regions to bolster their practical ability to access funds for adaptation and

mitigation needs. The theoretical prospects of climate change finance is being made a practical reality.

It draws on experiences of SIDS and LDCs that have become front-runners in accessing climate finance, sharing resources, risk pooling, technological and expertise exchange.

In addition to long-term embedded capacity in climate finance, the Hub will also advance south-south cooperation and collective learning through exchange of expertise and sharing of best practises. The Hub will be based in Mauritius with nodes in Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific. We have already deployed a Technical Adviser in the Pacific region, who is based at the South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme in Apia, Samoa, and is a dedicated resource to assist Pacific Island Countries.

In Malta, we hope also to bring a proposal with global participation to mitigate the risk of natural disasters brought on by climate change, and another to facilitate investment in renewable energy. This is work in progress.

### **Empowering young people**

This week, as we speak, Ministers have gathered in Samoa for the Pacific Region Commonwealth Youth Ministers meeting to focus on regional and global youth development challenges and opportunities.

Pacific leaders are indeed acutely aware we must partner with young people in realising our shared future. As young people will be the ones living with the decisions made today, they should participate in them.

The Commonwealth Youth Climate Change Network - a unique global network - recently developed a set of recommendations to put to world leaders at COP21.

In their recommendations they have hailed the Blue Economy and sustainable ocean governance as a mechanism for enabling citizens' wellbeing.

Young people believe it is possible to transform climate change into opportunities, particularly in fostering youth employment and youth entrepreneurship.

If properly managed, harnessing the Blue Economy can create a positive knock-on effect in improving social issues affecting young people, such as migration, access to information and technologies, crime and participation in governance and management of policies.

If young people are provided with necessary skills and participation spaces, they can play a pivotal role in national development and be an asset in disaster risk reduction, recovery and resilience. The Commonwealth has been a global pioneer in developing a Youth Development Index, professionalisation of youth work and youth entrepreneurship. The Commonwealth Youth Council is the biggest in the world.

## **Conclusion**

Oceans provide a multitude of essential goods and services that support environmental and economic well-being and health for everyone. Our dependence on the oceans as a source of resources and services can only continue to grow as human activity and populations increase.

Innovative and robust leadership at national, regional and global levels are key to ensuring that the Pacific prospers. Embracing the concept of the Blue Economy is an important step towards realising sustainable growth in the Pacific. The newly created Oceans and Natural Resources Division in the



Commonwealth Secretariat will no doubt do justice to this new frontier.

New thinking, mutual support, practical assistance and harnessing young people will help deliver healthier oceans and a more resilient Pacific, and the Commonwealth is here to support and provide partnership with solidarity in realising this strategic vision.

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