

The Commonwealth: An Overview

Founded in 1931, the Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 54 diverse, independent states consulting through a largely informal network of governmental and non-governmental links. The Commonwealth's 1.7 billion citizens make up 30 per cent of the world's population.

The Commonwealth has no charter. Members are, however, bound by guiding principles, including deeply held beliefs in the promotion of international understanding and co-operation. These beliefs are enunciated in the various declarations and statements issued every two years at summit meetings of Commonwealth heads of government. The most significant of these declarations are the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, adopted in Singapore in 1971; the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, adopted in 1991 in Zimbabwe; and the Millbrook Commonwealth Action Program on the Harare Declaration, adopted in Auckland, in 1995. All three clearly set out the Commonwealth's commitment to democracy, the rule of law and good governance.

The modern Commonwealth emerged when a newly independent India became a republic that still wished to retain its links to the Commonwealth. In 1949, a conference of Commonwealth prime ministers agreed to welcome India as the first republican member, to drop the word "British" from the association's title and to recognize the British monarch as "the symbol of the free association of [Commonwealth] member nations and as such Head of the Commonwealth."

The number of member states grew swiftly between the late 1940s and the 1960s as many Asian and African countries achieved independence. Since then, many small island countries in the Caribbean, Indian, and Pacific oceans have also joined.

Today, the Commonwealth promotes a series of common values such as equality, non-discrimination, democracy, and the rule of law. It is active in a number of diverse areas — from observing elections to providing models for good health practices for women, from advising member countries on debt management to helping them negotiate better trade arrangements.

The Commonwealth has attained a high level of credibility because of its consensual and supportive approach toward addressing members' needs. Past successes in South Africa and Nigeria have clearly demonstrated the Commonwealth's relevance and capacity to promote positive change. In the last three years, the Commonwealth has continued to help defuse tense situations in a number of member states, including Fiji, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone and Solomon Islands.