

The Commonwealth: An Overview

The Nature of the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 52 diverse, independent states, consulting through a largely informal network of governmental and non-governmental links.

After becoming independent, India chose in 1949 to become a republic and to retain its Commonwealth link. This marked the beginning of the modern Commonwealth. The number of member states grew quickly between the late 1940s and the 1960s as many Asian and African countries achieved independence. Since then, many small Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific island countries have become members.

In 1961, South Africa left the Commonwealth over the issue of apartheid. Thirty-one years later, on May 31, 1994, Canada welcomed South Africa's readmittance. South Africa's return to the Commonwealth paved the way for that country's participation in the Commonwealth Games in Victoria, British Columbia, in August 1994.

Today, about half the members are small states with populations under one million people. Present membership represents about one quarter of the world's population and about one third of the membership of the United Nations. Canada is pleased to join its Commonwealth partners in welcoming Cameroon as its newest member. Cameroon is the seventh Commonwealth country that is also a member of the Francophonie.

The Commonwealth promotes a series of common values such as equality, non-discrimination, democracy and the rule of law. As a result of the 1991 Harare Declaration, the Commonwealth has put special emphasis on values such as human rights, the democratic ethic, women's equality, sustainable development and environmental protection.

The Commonwealth has been successful in attaining a high level of credibility because of its non-threatening and supportive attitude to members' needs. Over the years it has developed areas of expertise that contribute directly to the capabilities of member states to face specific or common challenges. Member countries benefit from the support of a large network of private, voluntary and professional organizations, including universities, parliamentarians, legal, medical and other professions and organizations in the media and sports.

Commonwealth Principles

The Commonwealth has no constitution, but it does have formal principles. The 1971 Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, adopted by Heads of Government in Singapore, states that member countries must strive for the