



The Commonwealth: An Overview

The Nature of the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is a loosely structured, voluntary association of 50 diverse, independent states, consulting and co-operating through a largely informal network of governmental and non-governmental ties.

In 1949, after achieving independence, India chose to become a republic but to retain the Commonwealth link. This marks the beginning of the modern Commonwealth. The number of member states grew quickly from the late 1940s into the 1960s as many Asian and African countries achieved independence. In more recent years, many small Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific Island countries have become member states.

In 1961, South Africa left the Commonwealth over the issue of apartheid. It is expected that current developments in South Africa may result in the country eventually rejoining the Commonwealth. Pakistan, one of the founding members of the postwar multiracial Commonwealth, returned to Commonwealth membership in 1989. The most recent member, Namibia, acceded to independence and joined in 1990. Other countries, such as Cameroon, whose application is before Heads of Government, have expressed interest in joining the organization.

Today, about half the members are small states with populations of under one million. Present membership represents about one quarter of the world's population and about one third of the membership of the United Nations.

In 1965, Heads of Government recognized the need to create a permanent Secretariat to serve as a means to facilitate their consultations and to implement their decisions.

At the intergovernmental level, the Commonwealth is based on consultation, discussion and co-operation. The biennial meetings of Heads of Government are the peak of the consultative process. Unlike the United Nations, the Commonwealth has no written charter or constitution and does not conduct its business by means of votes or mandatory decisions. Views are exchanged freely, informally and confidentially as between equals. The Commonwealth thereby avoids much of the political posturing that can sometimes hamper genuine dialogue in other international forums.

The most obvious characteristic of the Commonwealth, beyond the common use of English, is its shared legacy of institutions, particularly in government, law and education. It forms a broad but manageable grouping of countries from five continents, with diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, economic characteristics and income levels.

It encompasses a large number of small states and of island economies. Its members enjoy an established, albeit informal and consultative, style of working together. It fosters close contacts and easy access at senior and official levels.

It has been promoting a series of common values such as equality, non-discrimination, democracy and the rule of law. As a result of the Harare Declaration, it 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, supportive and responsive attitude to its members' needs. Over the years it has developed a "cluster" of competencies and expertise that contribute directly to the capacities of member states to face their specific or common challenges. It benefits from