

'You are not alone' - Commonwealth-Secretary General pledges full support to Sri Lanka

Lecture – 'The Commonwealth's role in navigating the global era of Polycrisis'

Geopolitical Cartographer, Colombo, Sri Lanka 3 February 2023

Good evening, Ayubowan, Vanakkam

May I say what a pleasure it is to be with you, and personally thank President Wickremesinghe for his kind invitation to join you here today.

This is my third visit to Sri Lanka since taking office as Secretary-General.

This wonderful, beautiful, famous and proud nation, situated in the heart of the Indian Ocean.

A nation which, ever since that decisive step into independence in 1948, has played a role in the world which outstrips its size.

The Sri Lanka which blazed a trail in electing the world's first woman Prime Minister.

The Sri Lanka which attained admirably high social indicators in areas such as literacy and infant mortality, and set an example to the world by eliminating Malaria.

The Sri Lanka which helped to found the Commonwealth in 1949; which has provided skilled diplomats of the highest order to the United Nations and the Commonwealth in service of the world; and which brought the Commonwealth together by hosting our Heads of Government Meeting in 2013.

The Sri Lanka which showed its tremendous talent and prowess, when it won the Cricket World Cup! (Aside: Murali's record of 800 international wickets may never be broken save and except by a West Indian cricketer. And I can say that as the daughter of a fine West Indian cricketer.)

I know that Sri Lanka has felt – indeed, continues to feel – the weight of political and economic pressure. I was privileged to talk to young people from the Sri Lankan Federation of Youth Clubs and understand.

Pressure can be hard to bear.

It can be destabilising.

Isolating.

Frightening.

I am here because I want every Sri Lankan to know that you are not alone.

You are part of our Commonwealth Family.

As a Family, we have a responsibility for one another, a duty to each other, a shared love, and a shared journey.

And you are not alone in the nature of the challenges you face.

I travel all around the Commonwealth, and the wider world, and while every country's direct experience and circumstances are different, there are similar challenges everywhere.

You may feel as though you are living in a country under pressure.

But the reality is that we are all living in a world under pressure.

All of us tightly bound by a tangled knot of crises spanning global systems.

A world living with the social, political and economic consequences of COVID-19.

A world of crippling debt, rising inflation and high interest rates.

Spiralling costs for food and energy.

We are grappling with the tremors of instability and conflict.

And all the time, we are buffeted by the increasingly harsh impacts of climate change.

Each of these challenges can be characterised as a grave and serious crisis.

But taken together, they have been given a name: the Polycrisis.

These global crises interconnect, entwine and worsen one another.

What we feel in our lives is the relationship between these crises and the unique political, economic, social and geographical circumstances of the societies in which we live.

The shocks are disparate, but they interact, so the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

They combine and accelerate to amplify existing social, political and economic inequalities, and bring forward the tipping point for conflict.

Their effect is acute bursts of pain, combined with the gradual worsening of collective human prospects.

It is a grim reality. But the world has faced grave challenges before.

What defines our present predicament as unique is the lack of single causes and single fixes. And the way in which human activities have pushed the planet's ecological systems so far out of balance that all other global systems are in danger: from the production of food and energy, to finance, trade and international security.

What makes it so intractable is the dilemmas it creates, where attempts to resolve one crisis worsens another, like when poverty reduction measures increase fossil fuel emissions.

Or where even the definition of a problem is contested, such as in conflict between nations, and there is no clear path to resolution.

How do we respond to these challenges? What role is there for the Commonwealth in the eye of such a storm?

It is clear to me that meeting the Polycrisis requires a level of international political and economic cooperation which is unprecedented in this century.

Yet they are manifest at a time when the multilateral system is under immense pressure.

Indeed, the pressures of the Polycrisis contribute to that pressure.

The world feels as though it is fracturing and, in an increasingly polarised environment, people are anxious about the capacity of governments and international institutions to provide the leadership and action required.

It is in exactly a context like this that the Commonwealth can mobilise its greatest qualities.

We are carbon.

When immense pressure is applied to carbon, it can create a multifaceted, complex, resilient and magnificent diamond. That is our Commonwealth.

We began as a group of eight – including Sri Lanka – brought together in the shadow of empire, after the end of the Second World War and at the beginning of the Cold War, to ‘bring a touch of healing’ to relationships which were changing.

Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II herself observed a Commonwealth which ‘bears no resemblance to the empires of the past - an entirely new conception, built on the highest qualities of the spirit of man: friendship, loyalty and the desire for freedom and peace – and an equal partnership of nations and races.’”

She was right.

Today, the Commonwealth stands as a voluntary association of 56 independent sovereign states, spread across five continents and six oceans.

At 2.5 billion people, 60% of whom are under the age of 30, we encompass around a third of the world’s population.

We comprise developed and developing economies; island states and land-locked states; some of the largest populations of any country in the world, and some of the smallest; five of the 10 fastest growing cities on the planet, and some of the most remote indigenous communities.

33 of our members are small states, of which 25 are Small Island Developing States. 14 are in the Indian Ocean.

15 of our 56 member states retain constitutional links with the Monarchy of the United Kingdom. 36 are Republics, five have Monarchies of their own, and four were never part of the British Empire.

This includes Togo and Gabon, who joined the Commonwealth at our Heads of Government Meeting in Kigali last year.

Each is different. With different history, and different experiences.

But each is united in active, engaged membership of the modern Commonwealth, bound by the blend of practical advantages, common interests shared values which makes the Commonwealth unique.

And arising from all this is an essential truth: we are the world’s largest association democratic nations – and the most significant grouping of countries in the history of the world – which is bound, above all, by values to which we all aspire: the values enshrined in our ground-breaking Charter.

The strength of our combination of advantages, interests and values shines in the fact that, with a multilateral system under strain, the Commonwealth as a multilateral organisation is growing precisely because of what we stand for and what we can deliver.

We know that the Commonwealth story has its origins in empire. At times we still feel the scars of old hurts and resentments.

But our ability to bring leaders together today as equals underlines our strength and value:

The Commonwealth provides a continuous connection between countries separated by geography.

In no other multilateral setting can Sri Lanka engage so regularly, and so closely, to build partnerships in Africa, or the Caribbean, or Europe or North America.

We have difficult conversations in a constructive spirit;

And we face the world's challenges together.

It is unique in the world – and it has been a hallmark of the Commonwealth.

For decades, we have demonstrated a remarkable ability to confound our own history, and at difficult times to look crisis and evil in the face and call it what it is.

You can see it in our collective refusal to turn a blind eye to apartheid.

You can see it in the ground-breaking Lusaka Declaration on Racism in 1979

You can see it in the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment in 1989;

In Leaders Statement on Climate Change ahead of the Paris Agreement in 2015;

And in the landmark reference to 'loss and damage' in the 2022 CHOGM Communique, which set the tone for global agreement at COP27.

You can see it in the Commonwealth Charter, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. And you can see it in our continuous, tireless fight for the small, the vulnerable and the marginalised.

These interventions have been ground-breaking, and often shifted the dial.

So today, in the face of the challenges which are thrust upon us, we must have the courage to break new ground and shift the dial again.

The collective resolve of Commonwealth Heads of Government to do exactly this was there for all to see in Kigali last year.

And the credibility of leadership lies in our programme of practical action, support and assistance for our member states – which is more comprehensive today than at any other time in our 74-year history.

For the environment, our Blue Charter and our Living Lands Charter are unique, ambitious, principled, comprehensive and member-led.

And I commend Sri Lanka's leadership of the Mangrove Ecosystems and Livelihood Action Group (MELAG) of the Blue Charter.

And our Climate Finance Access Hub has unlocked nearly \$60 million of essential adaptation and mitigation finance for countries which most need it, and which might otherwise struggle to access it.

I am proud that Sri Lanka will soon be able to access the full benefits of this work, with the placement of a National Climate Finance Adviser.

In the face of economic turbulence, debt and inflation, our state-of-the-art debt management system is now in use across 43 countries to help them maximise the benefits of debt relief and generate manageable payment schedules.

And our trade and investment advantages continue to be a real example of the benefits of Commonwealth membership:

We may not be a formal trading bloc, but trade costs between Commonwealth countries are 21 per cent lower, on average, compared to trading with non-Commonwealth members.

And intra-Commonwealth investment has increased by nearly 30% in the last seven years.

Through our Universal Vulnerability Index, we are helping to drive a more nuanced and constructive way of defining and measuring the vulnerabilities of nation states, based not on outdated metrics, but on hard-headed assessments of each country's real resilience to identify where the need is greatest.

Our landmark Anti-Corruption Benchmarks are actively helping governments and the public sector assess laws, procedures and actions against international good practice; and make improvements if needed.

And it is worth reminding ourselves that the gap between what we have, and what we need, to achieve the SDGs is roughly equivalent to what is siphoned off through corruption and criminal activity each year.

Our Generally Accepted Principles for Performance Management – developed through months of painstaking engagement with thousands of leaders and senior civil servants – are set to proceed through the United Nations towards a global consensus on government performance management.

These principles might not grab the headlines, but they are the mother of all reform – and the foundation for good government. This is another example of Commonwealth leadership in the world.

Through our Commonwealth Says No More campaign, and our economic empowerment efforts, our work to end Violence Against Women, and to enable women to participate fully in political life, is reaching more and more people every day. And it is vital, because there can be no true peace, and no fair prosperity, without women's safety, and women's empowerment.

And our work to protect the process, institutions and culture of democracy – as well as our quiet-but-essential work for peace – serves not just the Commonwealth, but the wider world.

This is the Commonwealth today, in 2023. Our role, our relevance, our value.

Our principled and practical response to the grave challenges we all face.

But there is another dimension to this argument. The very fact of the Polycrisis shows us that, for governments, multilateral institutions, businesses and civil society, business as usual is not enough.

It is not enough to deal with the challenges we are aware of, and not enough to deal with the new and unexpected challenges which will inevitably come our way.

We cannot simply manage the impact of problems.

We must seek to transcend, and to build a better future, driven by a combination of hope, hard-headedness, and confidence in humanity's ingenuity.

During the last decade, the proliferation of challenges I have been describing has too often diverted our attention from a technological revolution which is dizzying in its pace and scale.

More people are connected to the internet than ever before.

More people rely on digital services than ever before.

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 it will have completely transformed our societies and our economies – so it will inevitably transform our politics too.

But if you talk to most public policymakers about the technological revolution right now, and you will probably find yourself in a conversation about how to effectively regulate Facebook

(or a debate about whether Elon Musk is doing a good job at Twitter).

These conversations are important, but they miss the wider point, and they sidestep the purpose.

What we should be talking about – what we can no longer avoid talking about – is how we can harness the extraordinary potential of technological transformation 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.

We must talk about how it is only through the development and deployment of new technologies – at scale – that we can achieve carbon neutrality and avoid the worst affects of climate change.

And we must talk about how we can close the digital divide, and close the gaping skills gap, to ensure the benefits of technological change are felt fairly, and equally, by every region, every country, and every citizen.

Those of you who know the Commonwealth will understand that, while we have so often set an example to the world, we do not shout about ourselves.

And those of you who know me will understand that I try to lead with humility.

But this is a subject on which I am particularly (and unashamedly) strident.

The Commonwealth must lead, is leading, and will continue to lead this vital work.

We are the only leading multilateral organisation which is properly equipped to tackle challenges and navigate change in an action-orientated way.

There can be no greater change than this – and, as with all our action, it flows directly from the mandates of our Heads of Government.

In Kigali last June, they focused on the transformative potential of technology for every sector, and committed to addressing both the digital divide and the digital skills gap.

By the end of November, Commonwealth Law Ministers, meeting in Mauritius, had agreed a paradigm shift in the delivery of justice throughout the Commonwealth, adopting a new framework which harnesses technology and digitalisation to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow: from the use of online hearings to clear caseload backlogs, to the use of artificial intelligence to deliver dramatic improvements in the speed, access to and quality of legal resolution.

Soon, Commonwealth Health Ministers, Trade Ministers, Finance Ministers and Education Ministers, will each meet to debate and adopt similar shifts in their own sectors and collective efforts.

And through our partnerships with Simplilearn and Intel, we will be training tens of thousands of young people across the Commonwealth in digital skills, equipping them with the knowledge and confidence they need not just to survive in a technological revolution, but to thrive in it – indeed, to shape it.

By the time we reach the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, next year in Samoa, we will have developed the world's most dynamic and comprehensive political and economic framework for harnessing the best of technological change to deliver real results for all of our 56 countries, and 2.5 billion people.

A Smart Commonwealth. A connected Commonwealth. An innovative, successful Commonwealth.

Because of our natural advantages, and unique blend of strengths, the Commonwealth is uniquely placed to achieve this:

Because of our shared interests.

Because of our practical similarities: in language, common law, regulatory coherence, business procedures, and large and dynamic diaspora communities.

And, above all, because of the values to which we all aspire.

These values of peace and justice, of tolerance, respect and solidarity - and our role as the foremost international champion for small and vulnerable states – are an enduring responsibility.

They express a vision for the world that will outlast all of us.

They make us different.

They make us special.

I believe profoundly that, taken together, they mean that the Commonwealth today, in 2023, is not simply a part of the international system, it is a beacon within it.

In the face of the Polycrisis, it is our responsibility to ensure that we do not simply honour these values, but that we ensure they shape the choices we make in the face of profound global change and challenge.

Because values matter most when they are being put to the test.

There could be no greater service to the world, and to the 1.5 billion people of the Commonwealth who are under the age of 30.

2023 is the Commonwealth Year of Peace, and the Commonwealth Year of Youth. It is also the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Commonwealth Charter.

It is a unique chance not only to renew our commitment to the values within it, but to bring those values alive in our work. There can be no better opportunity to ensuring that they do not simply represent words on a page, but the lived experience of all – now and for generations to come.

These values are especially important in understanding, navigating and harnessing the technological revolution.

It is exciting, and full of potential, but it is disruptive and, in the wrong hands, it is potentially dangerous.

A scalpel can save a life, or it can take a life.

The Commonwealth's position as the first decisive multilateral mover on technology is not only an advantage for our member states, it is an advantage for the whole world – because we can load the coming transformation with our values, which are unalienable, unshakable, generous and focused on the common good.

Bringing people together, drawing strength and inspiration from what we share, ensuring no one is left behind and, and advancing the goal of a more secure, peaceful, fair, prosperous, advanced and sustainable future for everyone, everywhere.

Where we can face the challenges of the world and the promise of the future as a family built from proud, connected nations: each with the confidence to stand tall, but each with the perspective to know that we are at our best when we work together.

And where our member states can benefit from the capabilities and experiences of our International Partners – such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation and the World Health Organization – and our amazing Accredited Organisations. We know that no single nation or organisation can face global challenges alone. We need the whole Commonwealth Family, together with the international system and the wider world, working for our common future.

Sri Lanka is not simply part of this work, you are central to it.

You have shown before that it is possible to inspire, and to be inspired.

You have proved that it is not about large your country is, but about the example you set.

I believe that any nation which brings the values of the Commonwealth alive, no matter its size, can be strong and free; prosperous and fair; and a force for good in the world.

This is Sri Lanka's promise, and the promise of the Commonwealth.

And it is my job – and my commitment as Secretary-General – to help you unlock that promise, for the good of all Sri Lankans, for the good of the Commonwealth, and for the benefit of the world.

Bohoma Isthuthi.

Nandri,

Thank you.