

High level conference on world food security: the challenges of climate change and bio-energy, FAO, Rome 3 – 5 June

Statement of HE Kamalesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General

Mr Chairman, distinguished Delegates.

The Secretary General of the Commonwealth has never addressed a High Level FAO Conference before. Responding to the kind invitation of the Director General of the FAO, I do so now to register our deep concern at the situation of global food security, on which so many leaders have spoken with engaged passion yesterday and today. I do so also to convey our commitment to play such role as we can towards devising sustainable solutions.

The 53-nation Commonwealth is an organisation based on values, which collectively brings its creative and constructive endeavours to bear on numerous areas of global engagement, frequently by using emerging methodologies. The `Lifelong Learning for Farmers' programme of the Commonwealth for Learning is one such instance. This is an experimental programme using ICT kiosks set up in villages, creating groupings and associations of farmers which encourages them to think communally about challenges and priorities.

It mobilises people – for example, local universities and agricultural colleges - who can provide information and advice, via the internet. It mobilises private sector banks, who deal with newly created associations of farmers and give loans to individual farmers. It uses other companies to market farmers' goods. Villagers are provided internet learning to log on to this service. The Commonwealth of Learning calls this `Development without Donors'.

Allow me now to offer two points of emphasis in my *diagnosis* of the challenges, and three in my *prognosis* as to how best to meet those challenges.

The Commonwealth accounts for one-third of the world's population, and every single Commonwealth country has its welfare at stake in this debate. Of the countries identified by this organization as being highly exposed to severe nutritional and energy import challenges, one third are Commonwealth members – in Africa, and in Asia. Meanwhile, the FAO has stressed that Small Island States are particularly exposed to the same challenges. Another one-third of our Commonwealth members are just that: Small Island States.

First, then, the diagnosis.

The Commonwealth stresses that food security is an issue of human rights, as much as a question of economics. The right to food is a fundamental human right, as set out in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

And yet, some 750 million Commonwealth citizens currently live in poverty. The Commonwealth's collective response to that appalling fact is framed in the quest to meet the Millennium Development Goals. Our deep concern now lies in the fact that the current challenges of food security – alongside those of rapid population growth – jeopardise still further our chances of meeting those Goals.

Rising food prices can be devastating for our poorer members, where greater proportions of personal income – often over 50% – are spent on food, and where social safety nets are weakest.

Second, the prognosis.

At the *immediate* level, we will rally membership support around the new funding mechanisms set up to meet the needs of the next planting season, particularly in the World Bank and the Regional Development Banks.

We will continue to lobby in the Doha Development Round for the end of agricultural subsidies in the developed world, and stress the need for review of export restrictions in grain-exporting countries. Further, we will lend our voice to the call for international examination of the subsidies that underlies much current biofuel production.

At the *intermediate* level, we will continue to inform global debate, notably when our Commonwealth Finance Ministers meet in St Lucia in October to examine the effect of high food and fuel prices on economic management. We will also continue a series of regional studies on the effects of climate change on the agricultural sector.

A recent Commonwealth study, for instance, showed that a rise in rice prices of just 10% in Bangladesh would push a further 400,000 households into poverty. We will use all of our Commonwealth networks – at ministerial, professional and media levels – to mobilize our communal understanding and response.

In the *longer-term*, it is clear that our communal solution lies in increased – more diverse, and more resilient – agricultural production, above all in developing countries. Government and donor funding will spur this – Malawi's innovative programme for grain production being an instructive and successful example – but the solution will lie in a Green Revolution of improved seeds, fertilisation, water and crop management, better and better-disseminated market information, and better infrastructure in the form of roads, communications, ports and markets. Allied to this, is the need for secure land tenure, including recognising the rights of women, so that farmers receive their rewards, especially the 450 million smallholders. Our technical assistance is especially being targetted at helping developing country farmers meet standards of food safety and quality, and requirements of labelling, packaging and traceability stipulations – an area on which, working alongside the FAO, we have just published a manual.

In the light of what we have heard from this conference, we will now deliberate on how we can further extend our engagement with this issue in the Commonwealth to the benefit of our members.

I feel our contribution could most effectively lie in wide ranging support for farmers to enhance productivity by sharing the experience available within the Commonwealth – an area of long term rehabilitation of the agricultural sector which many speakers have emphasised as necessary for a durable solution to the structural dilemma of an expanding mismatch between the respective rising

graphs of demand and supply. There is a wealth of experience in methodologies, support systems and extension services which should be more widely shared to enable this.

So our best Commonwealth efforts – our technical assistance programmes, our convening power for the exchange of best practice, and our capacity to lobby other international actors – will be channelled into this simple aim, to improve production.

To this issue as to any, we bring the quality of our advocacy, networks and policy advice. Our collective values impel us to address our collective challenges with collective solutions – solutions which we will, of course, make available to the wider international community represented here in the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.

In view of the pivotal significance of this sector for the political, social and economic welfare of our member states, it will be a key part of the come in for deliberations of Heads of Commonwealth members at their meeting on September 24 in New York.