

Small States and the Commonwealth

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The Commonwealth has taken a particular interest in small states and has become the major advocate of their cause in the international system. This article traces the emergence of an interest in small states and the provision made within the Commonwealth to address their concerns. These are examined in outline and the core interests of small states are identified. Recent actions taken by the Commonwealth Secretariat to promote their interests are then examined in detail. Three areas are identified: advocacy of their cause through development of the concept of vulnerability; policy advice in governance and economic development, with a focus on the joint study with the World Bank on the economic problems of small states; and the provision of technical assistance in a broad array of projects. The conclusion identifies five reasons why the Commonwealth has taken a particular interest in small states and argues that it will continue to give them high priority.

The Commonwealth has emerged as the intergovernmental champion for small states. In the last 20 years it has done much to pioneer the analysis of the special vulnerabilities of small states and to promote their development within its own programmes. It has also become the leading advocate for small states within the international community, leading in April 2000 to the adoption by the Development Committee of the World Bank and the IMF of a report recommending that 'the circumstances of small states should be taken into account in the policies and programs of the multilateral trade, finance and development organizations'.¹

This article provides an overview of the Commonwealth's interests and concerns with small states. These range over a number of areas of particular interest to small states and underline the Commonwealth's multi-dimensional approach to their development. The security of small states has been and continues to be addressed. The Commonwealth has recommended

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action designed to enhance traditional security, defined as threats to territorial integrity, and has provided practical assistance to combat the new transnational threats to security, such as drug trafficking and money laundering. It has focused on governance in small states seeking both to support democracy and to improve administrative capacity through the promotion of public sector reform. It has concentrated on the special economic difficulties facing small states by virtue of size and the threats and opportunities that have arisen from globalisation. In recent years small states have been especially concerned with the moves to free trade, which will open them to debilitating competition from larger developed states, and to liberalised capital flows that can deny them investment when they already find it difficult to get official development assistance or access capital markets. They have also expressed concern that the private sector is weak and unable to carry the main responsibility for development. A growing area of concern has been the environment. Small states are more vulnerable than larger states to natural disasters, which are mounting in regularity and intensity, and they increasingly feel the effects of human action that have put economic livelihoods such as fishing and tourism under stress. Worst of all, global warming and associated sea-level rise threaten to engulf several small states, rendering them uninhabitable. The Commonwealth, of course, is not alone in treating with these problems but in comparison to any other international organisation it has given them relatively greater attention and has done so in a way that recognises the particular vulnerabilities of small states. More to the point, in addressing them in programmes throughout the Commonwealth Secretariat it has defined small states as a core activity recognised and supported by the Commonwealth as a whole.

There is no agreed definition of a small state. The Commonwealth currently defines 32 of its 54 members as small states. They are states with a population of 1.5 million or less but additionally include Jamaica, Lesotho and Papua New Guinea on the grounds that they have characteristics similar to those of many small states. Other considerations are that all three have close affinities with other Commonwealth small states in their region and that the Commonwealth has been politically sensitive to any moves that would exclude these states from the benefits its small states focus offers.

THE ORIGINS OF AN INTEREST IN SMALL STATES

The first formal identification of an interest in small states emerged at the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting in Barbados in 1977. This meeting endorsed the idea that small island developing states had special characteristics and urged the international community to adopt special measures to assist their development. The following year the matter was

again raised at the first regional meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government from the Asia/Pacific region and was accompanied by a call to the Commonwealth Secretary-General to seek support for Commonwealth-wide programmes to assist small states. In response, the Commonwealth Secretariat prepared a programme 'designed to assist in overcoming "the disadvantages of small size, isolation and scarce resources which severely limit the capacity of such countries to achieve their development objectives or to pursue their national interests in a wider context"'.² The programme was endorsed by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Lusaka in 1979 and reaffirmed at their 1981 meeting in Melbourne.

There appear to have been three reasons behind these early moves. The first is that they were part of a wider initiative by small island states to seek special assistance from the international community. Other organisations targeted included UNCTAD in Geneva, which eventually established a special programme on landlocked and island developing countries, and the European Community, which granted special measures in favour of landlocked and island developing countries in the Lomé Convention. A second reason is key personnel within the Secretariat itself. In 1975 Sir Shridath Ramphal from Guyana became the Commonwealth Secretary-General. Ramphal was a seasoned campaigner for Third World development and had experience of small state issues in the Caribbean. He was also concerned to make the Commonwealth a greater force in international affairs. Finally, 12 new small states joined the Commonwealth between 1978 and 1984 as Britain granted independence to most of its remaining colonies in the Caribbean and the South Pacific, tipping the numerical balance in the Commonwealth towards small states. The combination was catalytic, placing the interests of small states on the Commonwealth agenda, although within the wider concerns of the economic development of the Third World.

In October 1983, the US invaded Grenada, a Commonwealth small state. The following month Commonwealth Heads of Government met for their biennial conference in New Delhi. Most Commonwealth states opposed the invasion, some vociferously, and it was a major item of discussion. In the Goa Declaration on International Security, which accompanied the New Delhi communiqué, the Heads expressed their concern 'at the vulnerability of small states to external attack and interference in their affairs' and agreed to an urgent study on small states going beyond economic development to include 'national security'.³ This was to appear in 1985 as *Vulnerability: Small States in the Global Society*. It was the first time since the late 1960s that the political and security as well as broad developmental interests of small states had been considered in the round by an international organisation and it was the point of departure which signalled a subsequent special Commonwealth interest and expertise in the prospects for small states.

THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF AN INTEREST IN SMALL STATES

In contrast to its early general concern with small states, the institutionalisation of a specific interest in small states as a generic category has come relatively late. A Ministerial Group on Small States (MGSS) was established for the first time prior to the 1993 CHOGM in Cyprus. It was not originally conceived to be a group exclusively of small states and so from the start included large countries. It also was seen to be representative of small states and therefore did not include them all. Dependent territories were also excluded on the grounds of non-sovereign status. The original membership was 18, drawn 2:1 in favour of small states, although four more small states attended the inaugural meeting in Cyprus. This MGSS took the view that further meetings should be held in the wings of future CHOGMs and other major international conferences as appropriate. Since then a MGSS has met at all CHOGMs, providing a separate report of its activities as from 1995.

In 1994 a Consultative Group on Small States (CGSS) was inaugurated composed of senior officials from the small states that participated in the Cyprus MGSS. It held its first meeting in London. It was charged with looking at special issues of concern to small states between ministerial meetings. It has held at least annual meetings since then and has on occasion met several times in one year to provide opinion on Commonwealth Secretariat initiatives. It is usually attended by senior representatives from the High Commissions in London, officials from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and, on occasion, representatives from regional organisations composed primarily of small states.

While the original intention of the Commonwealth Secretariat was to have a representative group *on* small states rather than a group *of* small states (hence the large state membership) it was decided early on to widen membership to all Commonwealth countries on a self-selective basis. In practice, and as the work of the two small states groups has become better known, membership has increased to include all small states. The larger member states that have shown particular interest in the work of the groups are Australia, Britain, Canada, India and New Zealand.

Neither the MGSS nor the CGSS is served by a specially dedicated office of the Commonwealth Secretariat, although in 1995 an informal task force on small states was established to co-ordinate work within the Secretariat and overall responsibility for this area now lies with the Economic Affairs Division. Instead, the view has been taken that there should be a 'small states dimension' to all the work of the Secretariat. This is understandable and reflects political sensitivities. In particular, there have been criticisms of the unduly disproportionate attention the smaller higher income developing countries get in comparison to larger, poorer, less

developed countries. However, most of this criticism is relatively low key and contained within the 'all inclusive' approach of the Secretariat.

Finally, another 'institutional' expression of an interest in small states has been the establishment of a Joint Office for Commonwealth Permanent Missions at the UN in New York. This provides office space for individual small state representatives to the UN and is funded currently by Australia, Britain, Canada, India, New Zealand and Singapore. Up to nine small states have shared its facilities: Belize, Dominica, The Gambia, Grenada, Maldives, St Lucia, Samoa, Seychelles and Solomon Islands.

THE CONCERNS OF SMALL STATES

The existence of the MGSS and the CGSS give us an insight into the special concerns of small states. Three communiqués have been issued by the MGSS. The first, in Auckland in 1995, identified three priorities: assisting the sustainable development of small states in the light of the Barbados Programme of Action adopted at the UN Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States in 1994; assisting small states to cope with changes in the international trading system following the conclusion of the Uruguay Round and the creation of the World Trading Organisation (WTO); and the security of small states, including updating the *Vulnerability Report*. These had earlier been identified by the Commonwealth Secretariat as areas for priority assistance to small states. The communiqué concluded that the membership of the MGSS and CGSS 'should be expanded to include all small states, and endorsed the current open-ended approach of inviting Commonwealth governments and other relevant governments or organisations to meetings of both Groups'.⁴

The second MGSS, in Edinburgh in 1997, focused on the revised *Vulnerability Report* entitled *A Future for Small States: Overcoming Vulnerability*.⁵ This provided a comprehensive overview of the economic, environmental and geopolitical problems of small states and made 44 recommendations for national, regional and international action in the interests of small states. Eighteen were on economic issues, 12 environmental, 11 political, three social and one institutional. In proportion they indicate the relative weight of concerns of small developing states in the 1990s, with the emergence of the environment as a key area compared to earlier periods. The communiqué also commended the work of the Secretariat on small states and concluded that the current arrangements as embodied in the MGSS and CGSS were working satisfactorily.⁶

The most recent MGSS, in Durban in 1999, reviewed the interim report of the Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank Joint Task Force on Small

States (hereinafter referred to as the Joint Task Force) established on an initiative by the Commonwealth in 1998. The main concerns of this Joint Task Force were economic development, although it also touched on environmental questions and on capacity building. The MGSS welcomed the interim report as 'a landmark document with high political profile' and emphasised the need for follow-up work on 'integrating small states into a more globalised economy; risk management; deepening regional co-operation; and public and private sector arrangements to finance rehabilitation and replacement of infrastructure damaged through disasters'. It also

welcomed the Commonwealth Secretariat proposals in the report to assist small states and asked the Secretary-General to give priority to these in designing programmes for its next strategic plan, so that the Commonwealth continued to take a lead role in promoting the interests of small states in the international system, and requested that adequate resources be made available for this purpose.⁷

The last qualification is significant since it points to the limited resources the Commonwealth Secretariat has at its disposal to carry out its work compared to many other international organisations, but which is frequently overlooked in the broad mandate given to it by CHOGM.

The CGSS has served several functions. One has been as preparatory meetings to the MGSS. On these occasions officials have reviewed the reports submitted to the MGSS and have broadly guided the agenda. On other occasions it has reviewed work in progress and provided general guidelines. The first CGSS focused on the impending UN Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island States. The second examined the outcome of that conference; the position of small states in the international trading system (the special theme of the meeting); and the security concerns of small states. The third focused on the updating of the 1985 vulnerability report and the fourth commented on the new report in its final draft and discussed ways that its arguments and recommendations could be taken forward. Meetings since then have focused primarily on the work of the Joint Task Force. They have considered the visit by the Ministerial Group, under the chairmanship of Owen Arthur, Prime Minister of Barbados to the World Bank and other major international organisations in July 1998, which secured agreement to establish the Joint Task Force, and various drafts of the Joint Task Force report. The seventh CGSS was especially contentious. A first draft of the report, with a large input from the Commonwealth Secretariat, had been well received by the previous CGSS in July 1999. The revised version, largely prepared by the World Bank, was roundly condemned when the

CGSS met in September 1999. It was considered unsympathetic to the special case that was being prepared for small states and was criticised as especially deficient in its analysis of the way the international system constrained the development of small states. Their condemnation, allied to concerns previously expressed by Owen Arthur as chair of the Advisory Board to the Joint Task Force, led to major revisions. The most recent CGSS, the ninth, met on 30 March 2000. It considered the Joint Task Force report that had just been finalised and some preliminary reactions to it. These, it was noted, could be divided into two camps: those who were sceptical of a special case for small states (France, the Netherlands, Belgium and the USA) and the majority who were more supportive (including not only Commonwealth countries but also large states such as Brazil and India). The meeting concluded by noting that the Joint Task Force final report, and the reactions to it of the Development Committee of the World Bank and the IMF, would be considered at the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting in Malta in September 2000.

The MGSS and the CGSS have ensured that the interests of small states have been kept to the forefront of Commonwealth concerns. They have provided important platforms for expressing the views of small states and commissioned important technical reports that have led to international action in favour of small states. They have also had a hand in shaping the strategies small states need to adopt to get their views across in an international system that is usually indifferent to their needs and interests. But, above all, they have underpinned, and made explicit, the claim of the Commonwealth to speak with authority in the interests of small states. Through the MGSS and the CGSS the Commonwealth has devised important mechanisms in which the individual and collective voice of small states can be heard and action taken that correspond to their needs.

THE PROMOTION OF SMALL STATES

In its section of the Joint Task Force report the Secretariat claims it has 'provided advocacy, policy advice and technical assistance' to small states.⁸ In practice advocacy overlaps advice and advice is sometimes difficult to distinguish from assistance. Nevertheless, these are useful categories which do show the full range of action in favour of small states.

Advocacy

The Commonwealth has sought to raise consciousness on small states through a number of initiatives, the most important of which have been the commissioning of two comprehensive reports on small states and the creation of a vulnerability index. As noted earlier, the first *Vulnerability*

Report emerged in the wake of the invasion of Grenada. It was written by a group of 14 experts, drawn from small and large states, with the assistance of the International Affairs Division and the Economic Affairs Division of the Secretariat. The experts gathered evidence from small states through regional colloquia in the Caribbean, South Pacific and the Indian Ocean (covering Africa) and the report was published prior to, and discussed at, the 1985 CHOGM held appropriately in the Bahamas.

The report was in many ways path-breaking. In comparison to other previous reports on small states, which tended to focus on either political or economic questions, the Commonwealth report looked at small states in the round. Its principal argument was that small states were inherently vulnerable and that special measures should be taken within the international system and by small states themselves to enhance their security. The report identified the characteristics of small states (defining them as states with a population of one million or less); introduced the concept of vulnerability; reviewed the threats to small states; examined ways to reduce vulnerability, including military, economic, social, diplomatic and international measures; and concluded by outlining eight arenas for action alongside 79 specific recommendations.⁹ The report was well received within the Commonwealth and was complementary to other studies on small states being undertaken around that time, notably by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, UNCTAD and a special study group co-ordinated by the David Davies Memorial Institute.¹⁰ The Annual Conference of the Royal Commonwealth Society also discussed small states in 1984, as did an academic conference at Oxford.¹¹ Finally, Peter Lyon of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London collected together a series of articles previously published in *The Round Table* for presentation to the 1985 CHOGM.¹²

This constituted a high point of interest in small states. However, only in the Commonwealth was it sustained. An initiative by the Maldives to get the security of small states taken seriously by the UN failed to make headway and the coups in Fiji in 1987 only temporarily rippled the surface outside the South Pacific region. The *Vulnerability Report*, for all its wisdom, was a victim to indifference by the international community whose attention it had sought to engage. This lesson was not to be forgotten when the revised *Vulnerability Report* was released, when consideration was specifically given as to how best to follow it up.

The call for a revised *Vulnerability Report* was made at the 1995 MGSS. The Secretariat determined that changes within the international system had been so great since the 1985 report that a new one needed to be commissioned. The idea of regional colloquia was dismissed on the grounds of cost and the new report was to be the joint work of the Secretariat,

consultants and a Commonwealth Advisory Group of experts with experience of small states, including several who had contributed to the previous report. I was the principal resource person for the group.

The new report differed from the previous one in several ways. To begin with, it covered more topics and was therefore larger. There were three chapters on the economic problems of small states and two on environmental concerns, as well as chapters on the political and international dimensions. Second, it took as a consequence a wider view of vulnerability than in the previous report while endorsing the analysis and all the conclusions of that report. New threats to small states were identified but a greater emphasis than before was put on what small states could do themselves, and with the support of regional organisations and the Commonwealth, to 'overcome' vulnerability. Finally, the report revised upwards the population criteria for small states from one million to 1.5 million and provided recommendations additional to those of the previous report. It also noted the important contribution made by the Commonwealth to advancing the interests of small states and spoke of the 'need to strengthen present arrangements within the Secretariat to co-ordinate programmes of assistance to small states'.¹³

The report was presented to the Edinburgh CHOGM in 1997. It was also publicised in a special press conference addressed by the Commonwealth Secretary-General and four heads of small states. The CHOGM welcomed the report 'as an important Commonwealth contribution towards addressing the particular concerns of small states',¹⁴ and it was the main item of business for the MGSS. At the conclusion of the discussion the MGSS called on the Commonwealth Secretariat to

advocate and build consensus on small states issues and concerns in international and regional fora, recognising the particular importance of regional organisations in promoting small states' interests; and follow up the new report by initiating practical and focused actions as the basis for new co-operative relationships between the Secretariat and other international and regional organisations concerned with the interests of small states as well as governments.¹⁵

This latter instruction was important bearing in mind the void into which the previous report had fallen, and was to lead to the establishment of the Joint Task Force with the World Bank.

The MGSS also called for the Secretariat to complete its work on a vulnerability index. The idea of constructing a vulnerability index can be traced back to 1990. It originated in work undertaken by UNCTAD in the 1970s on the disadvantages of insularity and remoteness and was first presented in a paper written for UNCTAD by Professor Lino Briguglio from

the University of Malta in 1992. In 1992 the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States also recommended the construction of an index. In 1995 Briguglio published an index in *World Development* and in 1997 the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs convened an expert group to review work undertaken on the construction of such indexes. It concluded that 'as a group small island developing states (SIDS) are more vulnerable than other developing countries'.¹⁶

The Commonwealth Secretariat first commissioned work on an index in 1996. Several studies were undertaken and in 1997 a decision was taken to complete an index based on the finding that the volatility of output (GDP) is significantly greater for small states than for larger states. The work was undertaken by Dr Jon Atkins and others at the University of Hull and has led to the creation of a composite vulnerability index which explains output volatility in terms of the lack of diversification (as measured by UNCTAD's diversification index); the extent of export dependence (as indicated by the share of exports to GDP); and the impact of natural disasters (as reflected by the proportion of the population affected). The vulnerability of a country is determined by computing a composite index based on the above indicators which is then weighted by average GDP as a proxy for resilience (the ability of small states to withstand and recover from external shocks). The results confirm the vulnerability of small states. In a sample of 111 developing countries (34 of which had a population of 1.5 million or less and were categorised as small as compared to 77 with a population above this level and considered as large), 26 of the 28 most vulnerable were small states while all of the 28 countries with low vulnerability were large. In the category of higher medium vulnerability, six of the 28 states were small states and in the category lower medium vulnerability, two of the 27 states were small. In the most vulnerable category, 19 of the 26 were Commonwealth small states.¹⁷

The index is a major step forward in providing a measure of vulnerability. However, the methodology remains contested, with the result that there continue to be calls for further work. There is also resistance to the idea of deploying it in determining development policies for small states. This was the original idea behind the index. Small states hoped to use it to gain 'special and differential treatment' in terms of continued access to official development assistance from the IMF, World Bank, regional development banks and the major donors as well as privileged treatment within the WTO. To date, they have not succeeded in persuading any of them to adopt it (though the European Commission has shown some interest). This is an area where the Commonwealth itself may want to take a lead among international organisations, and already has done so to some

extent with discussion of deployment of the vulnerability index as a mechanism for triggering insurance claims under its newly formed Commonwealth Disaster Management Agency.

Finally, note must be made of the series *Small States: Economic Review and Basic Statistics* published annually by the Secretariat. This unique series collects together information on small states with populations of under five million which is often difficult (and sometimes seemingly impossible) to collect from elsewhere. It has steadily expanded the number of topics it deals with and in recent years has provided useful summaries of selected commissioned papers and initiatives undertaken by the Secretariat for small states.¹⁸

Policy Advice

Policy advice has mostly been concentrated on political and economic issues, although in the past areas such as education have received a great deal of attention and at present there is an interest in environmental, criminal and administrative issues. The political dimension is naturally sensitive and small states have more cause than many other states to guard their sovereignty. However, since the adoption of the Harare Declaration in 1991 the Commonwealth has been charged with advancing democracy, the independence of the judiciary, good governance and fundamental human rights. Fortunately, small states are among the most democratic of developing states and those in the Commonwealth have a generally excellent record in this area as well as the observance of fundamental human rights.¹⁹ Commonwealth action in this area has thus been limited, confined mainly to ensuring small states participate in the programmes on 'good governance' being run by the Political Affairs Division and Management and Training Services Division of the Secretariat and are able to benefit from the provision for the observation of elections. As of December 2000, the Commonwealth has sent observers to elections in eight small states (some more than once) and it is clear that their reports have added to the credibility of the outcome.²⁰

The other area of action is even more sensitive and revolves around the 'good offices' role and other *ad hoc* matters dealt with by the Secretary-General. Not much is known publicly about these initiatives and the only time they are regularly acknowledged is in the biennial report of the Commonwealth Secretary-General and in the communiqués from CHOGMs. In recent years they have embraced the perennial problem of Cyprus and the current and former issue of military coups and unconstitutional suspension of government in Fiji. Other instances in the 1990s involving small states include Papua New Guinea, Lesotho, Seychelles, The Gambia, Guyana, Solomon Islands, St Kitts-Nevis and, in an analogous situation, Zanzibar.

A much greater impact has been made in economic policy advice. As noted earlier, this is very difficult to disentangle from technical assistance and the two areas have to be read together. At the forefront are the many studies that have been commissioned. In recent years the areas that have been most immediately important to small states have involved the renegotiation of the Lomé Conventions; the conclusion of the Uruguay Round and liberalisation of trade; and the five-year review conference of the Barbados Programme of Action held in New York in September 1999. The Secretariat has commissioned, and in most cases published, detailed policy-oriented studies on all these areas. They have been supplemented by policy-oriented workshops, usually held in a regional setting. Other areas where the Secretariat has sought to develop effective policies for small states include debt management, private sector and capital market development, and economic policy reform including taxation policy.

But by far the greatest initiative in recent years has centred on the work of the Joint Task Force. As noted earlier, this was the product of a Commonwealth initiative following the second *Vulnerability Report*. The resources and effort concentrated in the Joint Task Force were considerable. It included a representative sample of members from small states as well as regional organisations from the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and South Pacific. It met on a number of occasions and convened two international conferences: in St Lucia in February 1999 and London one year later. The final report, *Small States: Meeting Challenges in the Global Economy*, as previously noted, was presented to the Development Committee of the World Bank and the IMF in April 2000.

The Commonwealth was the driving force behind the report. Some key international organisations, from the beginning, questioned whether small developing states needed any special measures to assist their development. They included the IMF and the WTO. Others, such as UNCTAD and the European Commission, were more supportive. Still others were non-committal, including the World Bank,²¹ which found itself the subject of intense criticism following the tabling of the second draft of the report. Owen Arthur was especially scathing and as chair of the Advisory Board to the Joint Task Force secured a postponement of its consideration by the Executive Board of the World Bank at the end of August 1999. The World Bank's co-chair of the Joint Task Force was also replaced. The final report stands as a detailed analysis of the current predicament facing many small states.

The report first highlighted 'What Makes Small States Different' and then identified five areas for action. The first was 'tackling volatility, vulnerability and natural disasters' (including disaster mitigation, catastrophe insurance, commodity risk management and other causes of vulnerability and action to reduce it). The second was 'issues of transition to

the changing global trade regime' (including erosion of trade preference, domestic policies and economic management, and external support and the global economic environment)). The third was on 'strengthening capacity' (largely in national and regional settings). The fourth was on 'new opportunities and challenges from globalisation (including international financial services, information technology and electronic commerce, and public and private sector opportunities for exploiting new opportunities). And the fifth was 'external assistance' (largely on official development assistance). The report concluded with statements from the main international institutions of assistance provided by them for small states. As well as the Commonwealth it included the World Bank, the European Union, the WTO, IMF, UNCTAD, UN System, the African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.²²

I have provided elsewhere a commentary on the report.²³ While it has its problems, it must be counted a success. It highlighted the problems of small states and most importantly for our purposes confirmed the importance of the Commonwealth as the lead international organisation promoting their interests. It had programmes or plans in place for all five areas noted above. It also promised to be proactive in monitoring subsequent action, noting that it would be seeking 'agreement on a mechanism to track the implementation of commitments made by Task Force partners. Such a mechanism will be designed to review the progress of programmes, in close consultation with the partner organisations involved in their delivery. Their aim is to ensure that benefits are indeed accruing to small states'.²⁴ On 25 September 2000 the first annual Small States Forum met at the World Bank/IMF annual meeting in Prague. It was jointly sponsored by the World Bank and the Commonwealth Secretariat and was attended by representatives of more than 30 small states, mostly Commonwealth members, as well as representatives from the IMF, WTO, UNCTAD and the EU. It identified priority areas where small states were especially concerned to see positive action and discussed donor co-ordination. It shows that a start has been made to promote directly the interests of small states outside the Commonwealth, but given the previous record on pursuing small state matters the Commonwealth will need to be vigilant to ensure this meeting is more than an annual ritual.

Technical Assistance

In 1971 the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFCT) was established as a multilateral development fund. While it was not set up to provide specific assistance to small states it has steadily evolved in this direction with currently some 60 per cent of total programme expenditure disbursed through projects which benefit small states. In 1985 the figure was

around 33 per cent.²⁵ The focus on small states within the CFCT was mentioned by Margaret Doxey in her study of the Commonwealth Secretariat published in 1989. She noted that in some of the major programmes then run by the CFCT – General Technical Assistance and the Technical Assistance Group – small states were major beneficiaries.²⁶ Other programmes identified by her in which small states were prominent included work on education, health, management development, law and science.²⁷

The present position is that even more programmes are in place and nearly all divisions of the Secretariat have some element of their work concentrated on small states. Some idea of the scale is given in the report on assistance to small states provided to the MGSS in 1995. This notes the high level of assistance given in the previous three years as provided by some budget figures: 70 per cent of the General Technical Assistance Services Division and 46 per cent of the Management Training Services Division. It then provides instances of policy advice and lists nine areas in which the Secretariat has been active in mounting programmes, organising workshops and providing consultants. They included resource management (maritime boundaries and fisheries, terrestrial and marine resources, tourism resources); export market, industrial and agricultural development; environment, science and technology (waste management, water resources, mineral resources, coastal zone management, energy, biodiversity, forestry, information technology, technology management, climate change and sea-level rise, agriculture); human resource development and capacity building (education, regional capacity building and specialised training); management and administration (institutional development and management skills, administrative and managerial reform); legal and constitutional matters; media and communications; women and sustainable development; and youth and sustainable development.²⁸ While some of this is supplied from in-house resources, much more is done in co-operation with related agencies, especially regional organisations, in small states, and with the assistance of contracted consultants. In 1992/93, for example, more than 70 per cent of the Secretariat's long-term experts were assigned to 30 small states (including dependencies).²⁹ Their number and spread clearly exposes the problems many small states have in finding qualified nationals to fill many technical and professional posts and underlines the need for a sustained programme of broadly based capacity building.

This has come to be recognised as an area where the Commonwealth does possess a comparative advantage in its work in small states. In recent years it has received greater emphasis. The 1997 *Vulnerability Report* contained a chapter on 'National Measures to Enhance Security Through Capacity Building' and it was identified as one of the four priority areas in the Joint Task Force report. The Commonwealth Secretariat also pledged

within the report that it was 'committed to maintaining and where possible expanding, present overall levels of support for small states development, in terms both of advocacy and provision of technical assistance'³⁰. The focus on small states is thus set to remain, although the problem of funding may open a debate on both the scale and scope of provision.

In sum, in all three areas of advocacy, policy advice and technical assistance the Commonwealth has provided a substantial record of support. It has built on its record of technical assistance to move toward a more prominent and essentially political role as advocate for small states. In particular, since the mid-1990s, it has promoted small states within the Commonwealth and outside so overcoming the lacuna into which small states issues fell following the publication of the first Vulnerability Report. While the relative indifference of the international system to small states in the earlier period can be in part attributed to the peripherality of most small states to the major developments of the time, such as the end of the Cold War, it does not explain everything. After all, small states now face marginalisation within the unfolding processes of globalisation. The difference now as opposed to then is that small states are now more concerned with their common interest and the Commonwealth is self-evidently more supportive, organised and, above all, more proactive on their behalf.

WHY SMALL STATES?

In 1997 Peter Lyon repeated his 1985 initiative and presented a special small states issue of *The Round Table* to delegations at the Edinburgh CHOGM.³¹ In his introduction he noted: 'It is worth recalling, not for the first and surely not for the last time, that there is no intrinsic reason why the Commonwealth should be especially attentive to the interests of small states beyond the fact that over half the membership today comprises small states'.³² The point is taken if the criteria are population or poverty, but that is not the case and, in the words of former Commonwealth Secretary-General Emeka Anyaoku in his last report, 'the Commonwealth has had a very particular vocation in the area of responsibility for small states, especially as the number of countries in the Commonwealth continued to grow'.³³ In short, numbers do provide an initial basis for interest and engagement. What they do not show, however, is why that interest and engagement has been sustained and has steadily grown. I suggest five reasons.

First, as an article by Ken Ross in Lyon's 1997 special issue argues, 'the Commonwealth's acknowledged reputation on behalf of small states has in part, at least, come about because the United Nations has been too uncertain an advocate for such states'.³⁴ This does not mean that the UN should not be a forum where small states are engaged. The 1997 Vulnerability Report

specifically called for continued engagement. But as the outcome of the recent review conference on the Barbados Programme of Action has so clearly demonstrated, the UN has its limitations, despite a majority membership of small states in the Alliance of Small Island States which was very active in the review process. Another example is the vulnerability index. While the UN has been mandated to produce an index it has not yet managed to get beyond preliminary studies, for both technical and political reasons. Simply put, the UN is too large an arena for small states *qua* small states. Their interests have to be pursued in concert with others under well-established rules which weaken their collective voice, for example, that pertaining to regional caucusing for office. In contrast, the Commonwealth is more flexible and more open to influence.

Second, the same special issue demonstrates another reason why small states get special attention. They are vocal and they are informed, especially those from the Caribbean. They are also under increased threat and insistent that it be met. Ron Sanders, the current (and previous) High Commissioner to Britain for Antigua and Barbuda, serves as illustration. In his article he sets out the new economic, environmental and social threats faced by the Caribbean as a region of primarily small states and points to the weakening of key international institutions as 'guardians of the interests of small states'. He includes the Commonwealth within this judgement:

Not until March 1997 did the Commonwealth Secretariat announce – after considerable urging – that it was appointing an Expert Group to update the 1985 report in time for the Edinburgh Commonwealth summit in October. However, there was little or no consultation with small states on the membership of the Expert Group or its terms of reference. Indeed, representatives of small states had to press hard at a Senior Officials Meeting in October 1996 to focus the attention of the Secretariat and some Commonwealth Governments on the clear and present problems of small states.³⁵

That may well be the case, but the point is that small states were heard and action followed exhortation. The contrast can again be made with the UN system. The interest which UNCTAD had shown in SIDS throughout the 1980s fell away in the 1990s and, as previously noted, the Maldives failed to get any special security provision for small states other than that extended to all states. In the UN small states may get a polite hearing, but in the Commonwealth they command attention.

Third, one of the great strengths of the Commonwealth is its ethos. It is 'royal' and 'informal', 'conservative' and 'practical'. These are values that many small states hold important in their own political and social systems. I have outlined why this is so elsewhere and pointed to one of their

characteristics as 'institutional fidelity'.³⁶ The Queen is Head of State and the Westminster system is the basis of government in many of them and both are attributes that the Commonwealth nourishes and celebrates. Small states thus reinforce and simultaneously gain strength from these symbolic associations. It is further enhanced by the high level of participation of small states in the 'informal Commonwealth' of non-governmental organisations, particularly the professional associations. Small states, it appears, have built themselves into the fabric of the Commonwealth and while they clearly are not as important in the general scheme of things as some of the larger countries, they would be quickly missed, not least because the Commonwealth as an institution would find itself without indefatigable publicity agents, promoting Commonwealth events and the currently fashionable multicultural image of the Commonwealth the world over.

Fourth, there are far worse places in the world than London to be posted as a diplomat. It is still a centre where things count and useful to have on the CV. The same goes for small state nationals who serve in the Secretariat. Many occupy senior or other important positions and now that 'limited tenure' is established as a working practice the experiences to be gained are very useful. The breadth of duties to fulfil and meetings to attend, as well as the very practical insights into the many subjects the Secretariat covers, combine in a neat package the skills the ideal diplomat and international civil servant from a small state should have: some exposure to 'high' international politics, familiarity with a range of technical issues associated with development, and an appreciation of other cultures. I may be over-exaggerating the claim, but other than a posting to the UN in New York I cannot immediately think of any comparable experience elsewhere. There is, then, a vested interest by those in the High Commissions and in the Secretariat who come from small states in sustaining the Commonwealth as a vehicle for career and ambition. It acts as an incentive to make the Commonwealth and its Secretariat work, both to the advantage of small states and the Commonwealth itself.

Fifth, the Commonwealth has familiarity and credibility on its side. It is uniquely configured, containing both large developed and small developing states in wider and more fluid relationships than in similar international structures elsewhere, for example, the former Lomé Conventions and current Cotonou Agreement. In particular, it contains as key elements the large states which many small states relate to bilaterally, typically in a patron-client relationship, for security and development: Australia, Britain, Canada, India, New Zealand and now South Africa.³⁷ The Commonwealth generalises and assuages the asymmetries inherent in such relations. It provides a place where the rhetoric of 'partnership' can be employed to enhance the bargaining position of the small state client while at the same

time 'masking' the discharge of any residual 'duty of stewardship' by the dominant patron. In the process both tangible and intangible interests of all parties are satisfied, with the added bonus for small states that it delivers real additional benefits.

In sum, the Commonwealth matters to small states and serves the interests of small states: (a) by default (there is not much elsewhere); (b) because small states stridently demand it should; (c) because Commonwealth values and procedures are synchronous with their own; (d) because of vested interest; and (e) the common interest of small and large. Some of these features are helpful to other states but, in combination, small states uniquely benefit and collectively they serve to ensure their interests remain as core interests of the Commonwealth. This could of course change, and small states find themselves in the situation that they were prior to the 1980s. However, this is unlikely. The value of the Commonwealth today lies in its practical assistance to its less developed members and its informal procedures that allows all members to play a part. Its future is currently under consideration by a High-Level Group which includes two small states (Malta and Trinidad and Tobago) as members. It will be most surprising if in their report to the CHOGM in 2001 they do not endorse the current provision for small states and commend it as a central element of its future work.

NOTES

1. *Final Communiqué* of the 61st Meeting of Development Committee of the Board of Governors of the Bank and the Fund, Washington, DC, 17 April 2000.
2. Cited in Report of a Commonwealth Consultative Group, *Vulnerability: Small States in the Global Society* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1985), 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 3.
4. Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 'Report of the Chairperson of the Ministerial Group on Small States', *The Auckland Communiqué* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995).
5. See Report by a Commonwealth Advisory Group, *A Future for Small States: Overcoming Vulnerability* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997).
6. Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 'Report of the Chairperson of the Ministerial Group on Small States', *The Edinburgh Communiqué* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1998).
7. Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 'Report of the Chairperson of the Ministerial Group on Small States', *The Durban Communiqué* (Durban: Commonwealth Secretariat, 15 Nov. 1999), mimeo.
8. See 'The Commonwealth Secretariat Framework' in Report of the Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank Joint Task Force on Small States, *Small States: Meeting Challenges in the Global Economy* (London and Washington: Commonwealth Secretariat and World Bank, March 2000).
9. See Commonwealth Consultative Group, *Vulnerability*.

10. See Report of the Study Group of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, *The Security of Small States* (London: Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Sept. 1984); Edward Dommen and Philippe Hein (eds.), *States, Microstates and Islands* (London: Croom Helm, 1985); and Sheila Harden (ed.), *Small is Dangerous: Micro States in a Macro World* (London: Frances Pinter, 1985).
11. See Royal Commonwealth Society, *Report of the Annual Conference of the Royal Commonwealth Society* (London: Royal Commonwealth Society, 1984), and Colin Clarke and Anthony Payne (eds.), *Politics, Security and Development in Small States* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987).
12. See Peter Lyon (ed.), *Small States and the Commonwealth* (London: Butterworth, 1985).
13. See Commonwealth Advisory Group, *Overcoming Vulnerability*, para. 12.34.
14. 'Report of the Chairperson of the Ministerial Group on Small States', *The Edinburgh Communiqué*, Oct. 1997.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Cited in Lino Briguglio, 'Towards the Construction of an Economic Vulnerability Index: Recent Literature with Special Reference to Small Island Developing States', paper presented to the IESG Easter Mini-Conference, University of Birmingham, April 1998 (mimeo), 5.
17. See Jonathan P. Atkins *et al.*, 'A Commonwealth Vulnerability Index for Developing Countries: The Position of Small States', *Economic Paper 40* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, Jan. 2000), Table 7.
18. Five volumes have been published to date by the Economic Affairs Division. The most recent is Spring 2000.
19. See Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, *Democracy and Small States* (Malta: Report of a Commonwealth Workshop, 10–12 May 2000).
20. The eight are the Seychelles; Guyana; Lesotho; Namibia; St Kitts-Nevis; Papua-New Guinea; Antigua and Barbuda; and Trinidad and Tobago. Elections have also been observed in Zanzibar.
21. See Commonwealth Secretariat, *Report of the Commonwealth Ministerial Mission on Small States* (Washington, Geneva, Brussels, London, 8–15 July 1998).
22. See Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank Joint Task Force, *Small States*.
23. See Paul Sutton, 'On Small States in the Global System: Some Issues for the Caribbean', in Ramesh Ramsaran (ed.), *Caribbean Survival and the Global Challenge in the 21st Century* (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001).
24. 'Commonwealth Secretariat Framework', para. 15.
25. Commonwealth Secretariat, *The Commonwealth Today* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, Aug. 1985), 19.
26. See Margaret Doxey, *The Commonwealth Secretariat and the Contemporary Commonwealth* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 65–72.
27. *Ibid.*, 77–90.
28. See Commonwealth Ministerial Group on Small States, 'Commonwealth Secretariat Work on Small States', MGSS (95) 4 (Annex), Auckland, New Zealand, 9 Nov. 1995 (mimeo).
29. Figure given in *Report of the Commonwealth Secretary-General 1993* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1993), 50.
30. 'Commonwealth Secretariat Framework', para. 3.
31. Peter Lyon (ed.), *Small Statehood and the Commonwealth Reconsidered* (London: Carfax, 1997).
32. *Ibid.*, 5.
33. 'Introduction: From Kuala Lumpur to Durban', *The Report of the Commonwealth Secretary-General 1999* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1999).
34. Ken Ross, 'The Commonwealth: A Leader for the World's Small States?' in Lyon (ed.), *Small Statehood*, 70. Ken Ross was one of the eminent persons in the Advisory Group that produced *Overcoming Vulnerability*.



35. Ron Sanders, 'The Growing Vulnerability of Small States: The Caribbean Revisited', in *ibid.*, 55. Ron Sanders was a Member of the Advisory Board of the Task Force on small states.
36. See Paul Sutton, 'Political Aspects', in Clarke and Payne (eds.), *Politics, Security and Development in Small States*, 3–25.
37. I have commented on patron–client relations in small states in Paul Sutton and Anthony Payne, 'Lilliput under Threat: The Security Problems of Small Island and Enclave Developing States', *Political Studies*, 41/4 (1993), pp.579–93.

