

The Commonwealth and COP27

Climate change is an existential issue for Commonwealth countries. This is especially true for the 24 small island/developing states (SIDS), but major impacts will also occur in Commonwealth states in Africa and the Asian subcontinent. The 'ABC' countries (Australia, Britain and Canada) will be affected and to some degree are already experiencing symptoms such as drought, famine, floods and wildfires. In the Commonwealth South there will be adverse effects on the rights and livelihoods of large parts of their populations.

We appreciate the COP27 reception held in London by King Charles III, who is Head of the Commonwealth and an acknowledged authority on climate change and biodiversity, to begin discussions in advance of the COP about ways of tackling climate change. We also recognise the strong statement from UN Secretary General António Guterres and his call for a Climate Solidarity Pact¹.

It is an urgent priority to deliver on commitments already made to finance adaptation and mitigation measures in developing countries and to support a just and equitable transition to a sustainable zero carbon development path for all Commonwealth states. Freedom of speech and the human rights of climate activists must also be acknowledged and respected, as must the rights and of women and girls, who are disproportionately affected by climate change. These are expressed in the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan, which aims to advance gender-responsive climate action and 'women's full, equal and meaningful participation in the UNFCCC process.'²

At COP26 the Commonwealth Secretariat hosted a pavilion to profile and facilitate climate initiatives across the full suite of its policy initiatives³. We still believe that the Commonwealth, with its unique heritage and role in international diplomacy, is an association that deserves support and funding from its member governments to combat climate change, and we draw attention particularly to the fact that such support precludes doubling down on the use of fossil fuels in developed Commonwealth countries.

¹ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2022-11-07/secretary-generals-remarks-high-level-opening-of-cop27-delivered-scroll-down-for-all-english-version>

² https://womensgenderclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Background-Paper-The-GAP_v3.pdf

³ <https://thecommonwealth.org/cop27>

The impacts of climate change do not fall evenly across Commonwealth countries. Those who have added most to global warming – the rich northern industrialised countries – are most able to protect their populations from climate change impacts but should also support calls to fund adaptation and mitigation measures in the Commonwealth South.

The former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michele Bachelet, recently stressed that “the triple threat of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss constitutes the single greatest challenge to human rights in our era”⁴. Climate change negatively impacts the enjoyment of human rights - including the right to health, housing, water and food - disproportionately affecting people in situations of vulnerability⁵. The UN General Assembly has also affirmed in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that “climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time and its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development.”⁶

Looking ahead, Commonwealth States have an obligation to prevent, address, and remedy the negative human rights impacts caused by climate change. They also need to remove the barriers to participation at COPs and at related meetings that are faced by activists and by marginalised and vulnerable groups, including indigenous peoples, older people and persons with disabilities.

Member states must ensure that strategies are put in place to give priority evacuation to persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in times of crisis or catastrophe. Indeed, all those at risk need the nations represented at COP27 to pool their knowledge, understanding and wealth to avert escalating climate catastrophes. The key to success in all of this is a reversal of the global warming that has already occurred.

As representatives of the Commonwealth Accredited Organisations, we wish to express our concern about the lack of real progress at COP27 and would encourage work towards a more positive outcome at COP28.

⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1104352>

⁵ (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/ClimateChange/COP21.pdf>)

⁶ (<https://documents-dds-y.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/291/89/PDF/N1529189.pdf?OpenElement>)

18 November 2022

CA (Commonwealth Association)

CAM (Commonwealth Association of Museums)

CAP (Commonwealth Association of Planners)

CASTME (Commonwealth Association of Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators)

CBWN (Commonwealth Businesswomen's Network)

CDA (Commonwealth Dental Association)

CCfE (Commonwealth Council for Education)

CDPF (Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum)

CEC (Council for Education in the Commonwealth)

CFA (Commonwealth Forestry Association)

CHEC (Commonwealth Human Ecology Council)

CJA (Commonwealth Journalists' Association)

CLA (Commonwealth Lawyers' Association)

CNMF (Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation)

CommonAge (The Commonwealth Association for the Ageing)

COSW (Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work)

CPA (Commonwealth Pharmacists' Association)

ICWS (Institute of Commonwealth Studies)

RLSS (Royal Life Saving Society)

Soroptimist International

Addendum 22 November 2022

We wish to celebrate the breakthrough agreement to provide "loss and damage" funding for vulnerable countries hit hard by climate disasters and congratulate negotiators from across the Commonwealth on this achievement. However, the lack of ambition on emissions reduction leaves much to be done in preparation for COP28.