

***Small states will not be silent spectators at their funeral arrangements***

**By Sir Ronald Sanders<sup>i</sup>**

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*(The Commonwealth has a great opportunity to contribute to the outcome of COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021 as its extraordinary diversity enables it to speak without regional or economic bias. Whilst all its members can identify their key priorities, the challenges facing Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are common to many of its members, the largest community of SIDS worldwide. What experience can these bring to COP26 and share to wider benefit? What message should they take to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in June and how might its outcome link to the UN Conference in November?)*

It would be nothing new for the Commonwealth to engage on Climate Change and its harmful effects globally, and more particularly on small island states. It has done so many times in the past.

However, circumstances have worsened to such an extent that a robust and joint Commonwealth position is now again necessary and urgent.

The Commonwealth first addressed the idea of Climate Change and sea-level rise thirty-four years ago - in 1987 - at a Heads of Government Meeting in Vancouver.

The matter was not formally on the agenda,

But in a discussion of a Report from *the World Commission on Environment and Development*, the then President of the Maldives, Abdul Gayoom, spoke of the vulnerability of his own country.

He warned that with most of the land less than two metres above the sea, the future of his country - and others with similar topography – could be threatened by global warming and sea level rise.

A further intervention by the President of Bangladesh, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, on the devastating effects of flooding led to a decision by Commonwealth leaders to commission an examination of the issues.

An expert group was established, led by Dr Martin Holdgate, and its report “Climate Change: Meeting the Challenge” was published in 1989.

The report was prominent on the agenda of the 1989 CHOGM in Kuala Lumpur, resulting in the Langkawi Declaration.

The declaration was both a breakthrough and a disappointment.

For while Heads of Government recognised that their “shared environment binds all countries to a common future” and committed to a programme of action, the developed Commonwealth countries did not commit to do anything more than to “support” the Holdgate Report’s findings and to support low lying and island countries in “their efforts to protect themselves... from the effects of sea level rise”.

The wealthier Commonwealth countries made no commitment to the Holdgate recommendations “to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and bring their own concentration to stability”.

Little meaningful attention was made to the observation that “adaptation was not possible especially for the poor and become progressively more difficult with large climatic changes”.

So, while the Langkawi Declaration was a good start to Commonwealth action on the adverse effects of Climate Change, an ominous marker was also laid down, suggesting that wealthier countries regarded the issue as one primarily about small islands and low-lying developing countries.

That pattern continued as a divide between rich and poor countries in the Commonwealth and globally right up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris in 2015.

Of course, today – 32 years after the Holdgate Report and the Commonwealth Langkawi Declaration - no country is immune from the effects of Climate Change.

For example, the reliability of water supply in Southern and Eastern Australia is expected to decline because of reduced rainfall and increased evaporation, affecting irrigation, domestic and industrial water use, and environmental flows. Further, heatwaves, storms and floods are also likely to have a direct impact on the health of Australians, and there is evidence of these occurrences.

Canada is already experiencing effects on heat-related illnesses in the dense metropolitan areas of Quebec and Ontario. Scientists have warned that increasing frequency of forest fires, storm surges, coastal erosion, landslides, snowstorms, hail, droughts, and floods could have devastating impacts on the critical infrastructure of British Columbia and Alberta.

In Britain, the latest report of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change shows that “approximately 1.8 million people in the UK are living in areas at significant risk of flooding - a number which could increase to 2.6 million by 2050. Just under 12 million people in the UK are also dangerously vulnerable to future summer heatwaves, particularly the elderly or people with pre-existing health conditions such as diabetes or heart disease”.

I draw attention to these events to point out that Climate Change and Sea-level rise are not an “us” and “them” issue in the Commonwealth anymore, even if it was once perceived in those terms.

Indeed, globally, the problem is shared by all; and the future of all is now imperilled.

As an example, in the United States, a National Climate Assessment, mandated by the US Congress and published in 2018, identifies the cost to the United States economy of projected climate impacts: \$141 billion from heat-related deaths, \$118 billion from sea level rise and \$32 billion from infrastructure damage by the end of the century, among others. These figures will steadily rise, reducing the size of the US economy and adversely affecting the lives of the US population.

As we look to the June meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government and what they might do on this vital issue that spares neither the rich nor the poor, it is useful to bear in mind a significant point made by the Holdgate Expert Group in 1989.

They said, “while the Commonwealth, even taken as a whole, was not a large contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, its institutions – both technical and political – were sufficiently strong “to guide the world by its example”.

Whether or not Commonwealth institutions are still sufficiently strong to guide the world by example, is far from clear.

It would certainly depend on political will by the Commonwealth leadership.

Further, it is no longer true that the Commonwealth as a whole is not a large contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

Of the ten countries that are the top greenhouse gas emitters, accounting for over two-thirds of global emissions, two Commonwealth countries – India and Canada - are among them. At least three others – Britain, Australia and South Africa are among the top 15.

The top ten are: China, the US, the EU (including Britain), India, Russia, Japan, Brazil, Indonesia, Iran, Canada.

China, the European Union and the United States contribute 41.5% of total global emissions, while the bottom 100 countries account for only 3.6%.

At the bottom of this list globally are 58 small states.

The United Nations Development Programme has emphasized that these 58 countries contribute “less than 1 per cent to the world’s greenhouse gas emissions” but they are “among the first to experience the worst and most devastating impacts of climate change with greater risks to economies, livelihoods, and food security”.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty-one of the world’s 58 small and vulnerable states are members of the Commonwealth.

This would suggest that the Commonwealth should play a leading role – as an entry point to the world – in advancing practical programmes and projects, backed up not only by

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2017/09/18/small-island-nations-at-the-frontline-of-climate-action-.html>

pledges but by actual delivery of the funds urgently needed to tackle the issues that threaten small islands with extinction and low-lying countries with devastation.

The problem is worse now because of the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small economies, particularly those highly dependent on tourism.

The tourism industry on which many Caribbean countries depend has been wrecked. Consequently, economies have experienced shrinkage of up to 30 per cent; unemployment has risen to over 50 per cent in some cases; poverty has expanded everywhere; and revenues have declined precipitously, forcing every Caribbean state to increase debt for which they high rates of interest has been incurred.

To try to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on their economies, many Caribbean countries have paid for quantities of vaccines under the COVAX facility, established by the World Health Organization. But, orders have not been supplied in many cases, and full supply appears unlikely to meet urgent demand.

Negotiations with vaccine producers are difficult because supply is limited, and prices are high. A few countries, including Canada, Britain, the U.S., and the wealthier ones in the EU, have purchased more than 60 per cent of all available vaccines.

Lives cannot be separated from livelihoods.

Many Caribbean countries are in danger of collapsing from a massive economic sclerosis.

If these conditions are not addressed soon, many Caribbean countries face a crumbling of their security systems from which drug traffickers, money launderers, people traffickers, and organized crime will take advantage to the detriment of Caribbean countries. Inevitably, there will also be a surge of refugees.

Post-COVID, many Caribbean countries will have much reduced economies, high debt, diminished revenues, and little capacity to recover.

Indeed, the UN has already said that the Caribbean will face 'a lost decade' with economies and per capita income declining to 2010 levels.

They will need access to low-cost financing and grants from both International Financial Institutions and donor governments.

To achieve this, the current rules that disqualify middle and high-income Caribbean economies for access to concessionary funding must be altered to include their profound vulnerabilities, and to move away from the overriding criterion which is per capita income.

This latter criterion disqualifies many Caribbean countries from access to soft loans or grants even though they are open economies with high transactional costs for imported goods, services and inputs for production. What is more a small number of the population, mainly professionals and expatriates earn the bulk of incomes while the larger percentage of the population earn far less. Per capita income is therefore 'a false positive' test.

Additionally, debt has to be forgiven and repayments deferred on easier terms. If these initiatives are not taken, Caribbean economies will be caught in a poverty trap from which they would not emerge for a generation and, even then, only if they experience no disasters such as hurricanes, prolonged droughts, or flooding – all of which have a high probability of occurring.

Climate Change and sea-level rise hang like a sword of Damocles above the heads of small island states in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

Already in the Caribbean, devastation by hurricanes have led to increased costs for risk insurance both for countries and individuals.

Last year, amid significantly reduced income and high demands for dealing with COVID-19, the country insurance risk for several Caribbean countries was paid by Canada – such was the condition of reduced revenues.

But businesses that already endured high insurance costs from claims related to hurricanes simply closed their doors permanently, unable to afford higher prices.

From all this, it should be obvious that post-COVID Caribbean countries will not have the financial resources to invest in adaptation and mitigation, and should any of them experience a major hurricane, rebuilding will be an extreme challenge.

Scholars and Economists in the Caribbean are arguing that “it is not fair that poor, tiny Caribbean islands are bearing the heavier burden of climate change”. They say that “Menacing category 5 hurricanes are wreaking havoc on more islands than ever before”, and they ask, “why should Caribbean people lose homes, roofs and families because someone else is playing dirty or just plain dirty”.

They are calling for “environmental justice”, saying “we need to ensure that those who destroy the planet most, bear the consequences most”.

This development should not escape anyone.

People are now becoming energised and radicalised over this issue.

They are no longer silent spectators at their own funeral arrangements.

The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has pointed out that: “Carbon dioxide levels are at record highs. Fires, floods and other extreme weather events are getting worse, in every region”,

He stresses that “If we don’t change course, we could face a catastrophic temperature rise of more than 3 degrees this century”.

By then, many island nations in the Pacific would have drowned, their people fled, seeking refuge.

In the Caribbean, smaller islands will also drown, and larger islands will suffer significant loss of coastal lands on which their major productive activities such as tourism are centred.

I flag-up for attention that even though these realities are staring in the face of global governments, no inter-governmental attention is being paid to the looming issue of climate refugees – where they go, in what conditions, and with what rights.

Against the background of what has been set out here, it should be clear that, as the UN Secretary-General has said, “COP26 in Glasgow will be a make it or break it occasion”.

So, at the June Commonwealth Heads Meeting, small states should raise their voices.

Their lives and livelihoods depend on it.

They should insist that the Commonwealth – led by its member states who are among the greatest greenhouse gas emitters – India, Canada, Britain, Australia and South Africa take on the role as their Champion at the COP26 meeting in Glasgow.

This is no longer an “us” and “them” game, and while small states are the most vulnerable and face the greatest suffering, no Commonwealth country is immune.

And none should be allowed to kick the can down the road to future generations who will inherit a legacy of disaster.

The Government of the United Kingdom has a key role to play as co-host of the Glasgow meeting.

Those who are planning the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting should canvass big ideas and big ambitions, including designating Champions against the adverse effects of Climate Change.

Obvious Champions would be Britain, Canada and India – each of which are influential G20 countries; and two of which are members of the G7 that is also meeting in June.

Those champions should be vocal in Glasgow in advocating for:

- Drastically reducing and ultimately eliminating the cause of climate change while ensuring greenhouse emission reduction efforts are pursued to limit the global average temperature a 1.5 °C increase above pre-industrial levels;
- Increasing the funds and easing the conditions and procedures for delivering money for adaptation and resilience.
- Developed countries must keep their pledge of channelling \$100 billion annually to the Global South. They have already missed the deadline of 2020.

These are minimal requirements.

The 2015 Paris Agreement was an important achievement on paper.

But the commitments made are inadequate and they are not being met.

The withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement set back the world, not only by its absence from the discussions, but also by the back pedalling of other countries which its withdrawal encouraged.

With the US re-joining the agreement, the opportunity arises for Commonwealth champions to recruit it to the cause.

There was a time when it was said that “while the Commonwealth cannot negotiate for the world, it can help the world to negotiate”.

We are now at a time when the Commonwealth should give itself greater relevance and meaning by playing that role again.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Sir Ronald Sanders is Antigua and Barbuda’s Ambassador to the United States and the OAS, and High Commissioner to Canada. He served twice as High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, served on the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth Secretariat and as Adviser to the Secretariat and the World Bank on a vulnerability index for small states. He was a member and Rapporteur of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group that produced the seminal report, “A commonwealth of the people: Time for Urgent Reform”, in 2011.