

20 November 2007, Tuesday
Rt Hon Don McKinnon, Commonwealth Secretary-General
Closing ceremony, Commonwealth Youth Forum

Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen, young people of the Commonwealth – I am delighted to be with you as you conclude this, the 6th Commonwealth Youth Forum.

This part of the Forum is where those of us who no longer qualify as ‘young people’ come along and share their thoughts – and I will do that. But I have always come with another, more important purpose – to listen.

I care about the future of the Commonwealth, and I care about the *young* people of the Commonwealth, who embody that future. And it matters to know what you think.

Because we are indeed a young Commonwealth: nearly half of our 1.8 billion people are under 25, and a quarter are under 5. And at least six of those young people are especially important to me: I have a 9-year old son, as well as five grand-children. I have the great privilege and the great challenge of living it all again through them – their education, their friends, their hopes. I am already learning again, from the simple wisdom that *they* impart to *me*. And sometime soon, I shall be sharing in the next hurdles, of their jobs, their marriages and all the things that they will bring to life, and take from it.

That has added a special dimension to my work with young people these last 8 years. It’s why it is some of the *young* people I have met who have made the biggest impression on me in my time in this job.

Only last Saturday I saw again the limitless hope and potential of young people, in a group of Ugandan teenagers who have suffered more than most of you can ever imagine, caught up in the crossfire of an adult war. The boys I met in Gulu had been forced to take up arms and kill. The girls had been raped and now have children of their own. Those young lives could be blighted for ever – but it is both the hope and the humanity deep within them and within others which decrees that that simply *can’t* and *won’t* be the case. Our Commonwealth Rehabilitation Centre in Labora is rebuilding lives, and teaching and sharing new skills. Those boys and young men are learning things like farming, brick-laying, carpentry, while those girls and young women are learning skills like tailoring and hairdressing. We plan to train no less than 4,000 people. I would have said that these young people were emerging slowly from darkness into light, had I not seen and heard the joy of their music and dance, and the strength of their

testimony, when I saw them on Saturday. The light is already outshining the darkness.

It is young people like these and like you, ladies and gentlemen, who carry all our hopes for the future. I have no doubt that in this room there are future leaders and teachers.

And yet you know some of the darker facts about your fellow young people in the Commonwealth. Every year, 4.5 million children in the Commonwealth die before their 5th birthday, and there are 70 million children in the Commonwealth who have never been to school. And for those who are healthy and who are schooled – then the next set of challenges set in: those of sexual health, of making a living, and of taking an active part in a society that embraces them whatever their fortune, their colour or their creed.

It's not just a matter of giving young people the start in life that they deserve, but of involving them – continuously. What we call 'youth mainstreaming' means simply that there are young people's concerns and considerations in health, education, business, the environment, and politics itself – and that every Government decision and activity can and should have a youth dimension, a youth policy, and a youth budget. The policy and practice of 'Youth affairs' is not a ghetto for disaffected, indolent, marginalised people. It is utterly 'mainstream'. Our Commonwealth youth programmes focus on the ages of 15 to 29, which is quite a span. But it's the best indicator of the fact that 'youth' is no sideshow. How can we ever dream of pushing half of our population, and the one that will far outlive me, to the sidelines?

That is why this Commonwealth Youth Forum is important. It's why the Commonwealth Youth Programme is important. It's why Youth Ministries are important, and with them the Youth NGOs, and the National Youth Councils. It's why youth work has been one of the central pillars of our Commonwealth, and must remain so.

Let me briefly say where I think we have come from, and where I think and hope we might go to.

This is the 6th CYF: our first was in Edinburgh in 1997 – the year in which the People's Forum also took flight, and the year in which we decided to start the Business Forum.

I recall some of the highs and lows of previous meetings. If you have struggled to agree your Communique now, then don't worry: there is precedent. Who can forget the 4th Forum in Abuja, when one of the regional contingents was so

unhappy that it walked out, or the 5th Forum in Malta when some of the drafting team were reduced to tears....

Near the end of CYF, insert paragraph on key outcomes – on (i) policy issues and (ii) one speech, one testimony, one heated argument, one memorable moment/person/phrase etc. Also, workshops, skills training, advice on establishing National Youth Councils etc

But this Forum should take great heart from what came out of that 5th Forum in Malta. You made a massive difference by feeding directly into the new Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment for the period 2007 to 2015, which we launched in September. This is our road map for Commonwealth cooperation on youth affairs for the next eight years. It's new in that it makes specific use of the MDGs, and it adds three new areas of action: the environment, the professionalisation of the youth sector, and the ability to monitor and evaluate progress in youth development.

By now, you should all have had a chance to look at it. It is my hope that some of you will become ambassadors for the Plan of Action in your home countries. In similar fashion we will be taking your decisions forward at the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting in Sri Lanka in April next year.

As you probably know, we have a permanent structure in place for policy dialogue. The Commonwealth Youth Caucus has two representatives from every Member Country. Indeed some of *you* are members. Through the Caucus, young people have a voice in Commonwealth decision-making. I know, for instance, how the two Caucus members for Cameroon, Emmanuel and Mercy, have played a big role in drawing up a National Youth Policy. Mercy also took part in an election observer mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo, and is now involved in the Commonwealth's efforts to help Cameroon create an Independent Electoral Commission.

So that is where we have come from and where we are at. But where do we go to?

This is a question I have asked of 10 of our Heads of Government, who will meet in three days time, immediately before all 53 meet at Munityonyo. Eight young people in this room – with two spokespeople, ***name*** from ***where*** and ***name*** from ***where*** – will go into that meeting with Heads, and state your case. I did not mince words with Heads when I told them that we have to do a whole lot better for Commonwealth youth, and that they need to show leadership and commitment.

We already have the outlines of a number of initiatives which we want those Heads of Government to endorse. If the 10 do so, and if they in turn convince the 40 others to do so, then we will have a real mandate to bring a significant new dimension to our Commonwealth youth work. Here are six priorities we want them to sign up to.

First, I believe we should press for young people to be more involved in the processes of democracy. That means that they should have a voice and a role in the work of electoral commissions, or local councils, or political parties, and national parliaments. I am impressed with Uganda's own 'youth MPs'. Young people – like Mercy – should automatically be part of local election observation missions: they are always a part of Commonwealth Observer Groups.

Second, I believe we should press for fully staffed, resourced, supported Youth Ministries within Governments. Youth tends to be bundled in with other Ministerial portfolios, and it suffers accordingly. But the successful precedent is there: just look at Malaysia and Barbados.

Third, I believe we should press for the logical results of the youth mainstreaming I was just talking about. Ministries of Finance, Planning, Education, Health and Justice should each allocate specific budgets for the youth elements of their work. A policy that listens to youth is a good policy: it's as simple as that. In Jamaica recently I saw how young people have contributed to a new police code of conduct, and built a strong culture of trust in the process.

Fourth, I believe we can press for more involvement from young people in building respect and understanding between peoples, which, as you will probably know, is the topic of a Commonwealth report which has just been published. It's about resolving fracture and grievance in our societies, first and foremost by understanding and talking about them. Heads of Government will discuss it in the next few days. I know that this Forum has already heard Elaine Howard from Tonga on this subject.

Fifth, I believe we can press for a greater role for young people in defusing conflict. We saw in Gulu where young people were the victims of conflict, and we know that nearly one million children worldwide have somehow been involved in armed conflict. But young people are the solutions to conflict too. We already have Young Ambassadors for Positive Living, working to help in the fight against HIV/AIDS and ignorance. Why not have Young Ambassadors for Peace?

Sixth and finally, I believe we must push for more financial support for the Commonwealth Youth Programme. It's over 30 years old; it's based in four regional centres – Guyana for the Caribbean, Lusaka for Africa, Chandigarh for Asia and Honiara for the Pacific. Indeed the Chandigarh Centre is all set to become a 'Centre of Excellence' in the field of youth and governance. Worldwide, the Programme does exceptional work in youth training, micro-credit

for youth entrepreneurs, youth mentoring, and the planning of youth work – both in Governments and in national youth councils. And yet the Programme is seriously under-funded. A new commitment to the Programme is just one way of realising those first five, wider goals.

So these are some aspects of the way ahead for youth work in the Commonwealth. We have the power to make them policy this very week, if we put them into our Heads of Government Communiqué.

I know that in one form or another they are already in *your* Communiqué – a sure way of knowing that they will be responded to at the level of Heads of Government.

The young people of the Commonwealth expect nothing less of you, than that you are their voice here in Kampala.

Thank you all for the energy and passion you have brought to this Forum. I thank the Ugandan Government and the National Youth Council of Uganda for hosting us here, and UNICEF which has brought so many of you here. I thank Vic Craggs and the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council for all their efforts – and particularly I thank my colleague Fatiha Serour, the team she leads within the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the 16 people working worldwide for the Commonwealth Youth Programme.

If I can leave you with one parting thought, it is this. Never give up on your hopes and dreams. Keep being vocal, and keep letting us know. And in return, we will continue to work as hard as we can to help you.

Thank you.

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