



COMMONWEALTH STATEMENT ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

We - the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth's fifty-four equal and independent member states - are committed to working transparently and constructively within the Commonwealth family and with our international partners to address COVID-19 and its impacts; build resilience, particularly for developing economies and the most vulnerable countries; and ensure no one is left behind.

We are deeply saddened by the tragic loss of life and unprecedented suffering faced by people in the Commonwealth and around the world. We are immensely proud of the way our citizens, businesses, public sector workers and civil society organisations have responded, and the unprecedented steps they are taking to protect our healthcare systems and each other. In particular, we express our gratitude and support to all frontline health specialists and essential workers who continue to strive to support our communities and help fight the pandemic.

Upholding our Fundamental Principles

As we respond to this unprecedented challenge, we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to our core values and principles as set out in the Commonwealth Charter, which we will continue to uphold as we deliver our collective response to COVID-19. This includes upholding the rule of law, consistency with relevant international treaties, and ensuring that measures taken are transparent and reasonable, and that they do not disproportionately impact the human rights and fundamental freedoms of any of our citizens. We will continue to fight against hate speech, targeting of vulnerable groups and all forms of discrimination, particularly those arising from the pandemic - whether rooted in age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, political, economic or other grounds. We will also take necessary measures to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation, online and offline, including manipulated media that incites violence and divides communities, while ensuring that any action respects human rights.

Contributing to the Global Health Response

We are committed to working with the spirit of global cooperation, unity and solidarity to protect the health of all our citizens, and do all we can to ensure equitable access to quality essential health services and safe, effective, quality and affordable medicines and vaccines for all, particularly the most vulnerable and high-risk populations such as older persons, people with disabilities, and others who are more likely to have a pre-existing health condition. Each country will need to adopt and implement appropriate measures to reduce both COVID-19 transmission and the economic, social and environmental impacts, including on physical and mental health. Communicating, engaging and working with communities will be essential in delivering our collective response.

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We will continue to work in cooperation with our international partners to overcome the pandemic. This includes supporting the World Health Organization, whose leadership on global health issues within the broader international response is pivotal; and fulfilling the commitments contained in Resolution WHA73.1 “COVID-19 Response” adopted at the 73rd World Health Assembly, including to independent, impartial and comprehensive evaluation of the COVID-19 response. In this context, our approach should be consistent with the provisions of relevant international treaties including the provisions of the TRIPS agreement and the flexibilities as confirmed by the Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health.

We will intensify our collective efforts and welcome the commitment of health ministers at their 32nd meeting to deliver a coordinated response. We will also work collaboratively to facilitate and support research and development of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, and innovative approaches such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator; to share best practices; and to support timely, equitable, and affordable access to health products and health technologies, including potential vaccines, treatments, diagnostics and medical supplies for all who need them. We will support the continued flow of these vital medical supplies, commodities and equipment, agricultural and food products, and other essential goods and services across borders to further support our citizens’ health, and mitigate the risk of food insecurity and malnutrition.

We note the risk posed by COVID-19 to Commonwealth priorities, including Universal Health Coverage, and halving malaria in the Commonwealth by 2023. We will seek to balance our immediate response and our long-term commitments to health and wellbeing, including non-communicable diseases (NCDs), nutrition, access to domestic and gender-based violence services, women’s and girls’ health, maternal health, sexual and reproductive health, as well as providing other essential services such as water, sanitation and hygiene. We will also strengthen preparedness, detection and response capacities, in line with the WHO’s 2005 International Health Regulations, taking a One Health approach. This will achieve greater resilience and sustainability, reduce the risk of future shocks and accelerate progress on all seventeen Sustainable Development Goals through the Decade of Action.

Safeguarding our Future Prosperity

We are deeply concerned by the wide-ranging economic, social and environmental implications of COVID-19, particularly the difficulty for many countries of mounting an emergency response while maintaining adequate focus on delivering sustainable development. We will use all available policy tools to minimize the economic, social and environmental damage from the pandemic, maintain economic and financial stability, safeguard jobs and strengthen resilience.

We welcome the G20 COVID-19 Action Plan on supporting the global economy, including the time-bound suspension of debt service payments by the poorest countries. We also support the rapid response of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to help their members tackle the crisis and encourage their policy flexibility. We recognise that broader sovereign debt vulnerabilities in some countries may be exacerbated by COVID-19, and we encourage borrowers and creditors, including commercial lenders, as well as IFIs to continue to collaborate closely to ensure long-term sovereign debt sustainability and access to international finance markets. We will work with IFIs to

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support the provision of further and rapid support to where the needs and risks are greatest in collaboration with one another and other actors, including UN agencies; and to support a clean, sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery. We will collaborate with the IFIs to put in place post recovery plans to scale up financial resources, enhance policy space for domestic production, and to build resilience.

The pandemic has increased the vulnerability of workers, especially migrant workers and those working in the informal economy. It has caused combined supply and demand shocks and shrinking labour markets, increasing risks of modern slavery in the world of work, and human trafficking. The Commonwealth's 1.2 billion young people are particularly likely to suffer economically. Protecting their opportunities for income and decent productive employment is essential. We must ensure that temporary shocks do not have long-lasting or permanent implications for poverty reduction and the ability of all workers to enjoy safe and decent work. We also recognise remittance flows are important sources of support for the well-being and survival of families and communities. We will work to minimise any substantial and sustained decrease in remittance flows while maintaining financial integrity.

Women and girls and other marginalised groups, including those with disabilities, are more likely to suffer economically from COVID-19. Inclusion is central to economic stimulus, health services and social protection. Marginalised groups will be particularly impacted by school closures: we will continue to encourage implementation of specific actions to provide the opportunity for at least 12 years of quality education and learning for girls and boys by 2030. We are particularly concerned that children who are spending more time at home and online are increasingly vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation, and are at greater risk of online harms such as sexual exploitation and abuse. Protecting the safety of children and all vulnerable groups, must be prioritised.

Women and girls' leadership and contributions are essential to response and recovery efforts: we support their meaningful participation and leadership in the immediate response and longer-term recovery, including economic recovery. We will continue existing efforts to scale up lifesaving reporting, protection and support services for women and girls to mitigate the risk of a surge in gender-based and domestic violence. We will protect and strengthen initiatives which promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Addressing International Trade Disruptions

As we lay the foundations for a strong economic recovery and the maintenance of global food security, we reaffirm our commitment to the multilateral trading system and a free, fair, inclusive, predictable and stable trade and investment environment, which takes into account the special requirements of least developed countries and small and vulnerable economies. All stakeholders in global supply chains should share the responsibility for working together constructively to keep them open and mitigate the pandemic's impact on trade.

Emergency trade measures designed to tackle COVID-19, if deemed necessary, should be consistent with WTO rules and must be targeted, proportionate, transparent, and temporary. We affirm that such measures will be implemented in the spirit of Commonwealth solidarity and in accordance with international principles, bearing in

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mind the evolving needs of our citizens as well as those of other countries for emergency supplies and humanitarian assistance. We pledge to lift any such measures as soon as possible.

We emphasise the importance of transparency in the current environment and our commitment to notify the WTO of any trade related measures taken, all of which will enable global supply chains to continue to function in this crisis, while expediting the recovery that will follow. We recognise the need to support developing countries that highlight specific capacity constraints. Given the WTO's critical importance to all our members, we reaffirm our commitment to work constructively together and with other WTO members on the necessary reform of the organisation with a sense of urgency.

We recognise the importance of international trade and investment, sharing best practices and promoting economic cooperation and development for sustainable economic growth, in boosting employment and incomes in our countries, and helping them achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our officials working on the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda will redouble efforts and identify ways to reduce barriers and promote the adoption of digital technologies as a positive enabler in order to increase resilient, inclusive and diverse trade and investment, and to strengthen global supply chains.

Protecting the Future of Small and Vulnerable States

The Commonwealth has always been a strong advocate for small and vulnerable states, including Small Island Developing States, and has consistently raised awareness of inherent challenges which many of them face - small economies, resource-challenged, often heavily dependent on industries such as tourism and fishing; difficult access to supply chains for essential goods which cannot be produced locally; heavy indebtedness; constraints for some SIDS on access to concessional finance and ODA; and susceptibility to catastrophic climatic events. The impacts of the pandemic have highlighted and exacerbated these challenges, bringing acute economic setbacks which, with their other vulnerabilities, severely limit these states' ability to respond effectively. As Commonwealth partners, we must make a concerted effort, consistent with national capability, to find solutions to overcome these challenges, including, where necessary, sustainable debt restructuring coordinated via the international financial architecture, mitigating the effects of economic contraction, increasing resilience and providing equitable access to essential medicines, equipment and supplies, having due regard for particular humanitarian needs.

Global Cooperation and Multilateralism

The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the importance of multilateral cooperation in a rules-based international system. We reaffirm our shared responsibility to work with the United Nations, other international and regional organisations and IFIs in our response, and our unwavering commitment to realise the 2030 Agenda and the aspirations of the Commonwealth Charter.

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Whilst recognising the immediate challenge of tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, we join with the UN Secretary General in simultaneously recognising the need to keep a clear focus on other global challenges such as the climate crisis; decline in ocean health; transboundary pests and diseases; biodiversity loss; and violent extremism conducive to terrorism. We must build back better. Our response must support the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement, so that we can achieve our climate and biodiversity goals, and sustain inclusive, climate-resilient economic development.

We remain committed to urgently increasing climate action and ambition in line with the UNFCCC, the Paris Agreement and their principles, including common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities in the light of different national circumstances. Consistent with the best available science, we are committed to building resilience and adaptation, to reducing greenhouse gas emissions through credible climate plans in the form of nationally determined contributions, with a view to enhancing their level of ambition, and to increased ambition on finance. We look forward to contributing to the success of COP26.

In making these commitments, we recognise that the strength and potential of the Commonwealth lie in collaboration between its member states, its intergovernmental organisations - the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning; and its network of associated and accredited organisations. As we strive to maximise that potential in the face of the immediate challenge, we look forward to deepening our collaboration at the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and associated Commonwealth fora in Rwanda.