

Speech by the

**Commonwealth Secretary-General
Rt Hon Don McKinnon**

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at the

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We meet in the shadow of one of the biggest natural disasters in human memory. The Tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean on 26 December killed over 150,000 people, wiping out entire communities.

People in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are all too familiar with the devastating impact of natural disasters. In September last year, Hurricane Ivan ripped through the Caribbean, leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. And people in the Pacific are currently weathering another season of cyclones and hurricanes, as I speak.

This International Meeting gives us a unique opportunity to agree on measures to help mitigate the impact of such disasters in the future.

This meeting is of vital importance for three other reasons:

First, it puts small Island developing states under the international spotlight and help draw attention to the specific issues they face. I know that there has been a great deal of debate about what constitutes a SIDS. One thing that is beyond debate, however, is the fact that SIDS have specific vulnerabilities which the world must recognise. For over 20 years, the Commonwealth has led the international community in bringing the needs of small states to the fore and providing solutions to help them become stronger and more resilient. Small states are uniquely challenged and require unique responses — that is an article of Commonwealth faith based on fact.

Second, this international meeting gives us a chance to take stock of what has been achieved in promoting the sustainable development of small island developing states since the Barbados meeting nearly eleven years ago.

Third — and most importantly — it urges us to look to the future and take decisive action.

We must be honest and recognise that the international community has not done all it pledged to do for small island developing states a decade ago.

If the Mauritius meeting produces yet more hollow rhetoric that leaves the diplomats, the sherpas and the minute writers happy but the inhabitants of small island states no better off, then we will all have failed. Genuine engagement and bankable commitments by the resource-rich to help the resource-poor is needed more than pages of high aspirations and warm words.

There is a time for promises and a time for action. Now is the time for action.

We know what the problems are. We also know what the solutions are or should be. What is needed, now more than ever, is the political will to implement them.

Doing more for small Island states is our shared responsibility. The issue here is not lack of knowledge. It's not lack of technology. It's not even lack of resources or money. It is, quite simply, a matter of inspired leadership and commitment by us here in this room to work in partnership for results.

Producing the draft Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Barbados Plan of Action has been a long and difficult negotiation. But that was the easy part. The hard part is to

implement it. The success of this meeting will not be measured by the number of pages of its statements and resolutions. It will be measured by the concrete results it will generate.

The overwhelming response to the Tsunami disaster by ordinary people around the world should be a source of inspiration and encouragement for governments.

Politicians and officials in the industrialised nations have been taken by surprise by people's capacity for generosity. They should now draw the right conclusions. They should realise that many electors in the developed world are genuinely concerned about the fate of fellow human beings on the other side of the planet and are willing to dig deep into their pockets to help them.

There is today a clear public demand for poverty alleviation. Politicians should have no fear about losing votes if they pursue generous development policies through debt relief, trade reform and foreign aid. They should seize this opportunity to honour their commitments to Small Island Developing States, secure in the knowledge that electors will back them.

The *Strategy for Further Implementation of the Barbados Plan of Action* is certainly a good start. But in order to deliver real change for small Island developing states, this strategy needs to be harnessed towards specific, realistic, time-bound targets.

We, in the Commonwealth, will continue to help achieve these targets.

Over the past few years, there has been no let up in Commonwealth efforts to help small states cope with their vulnerabilities.

In the area of trade, we have been working with the European Commission and other partners on a 17 million euros "Hubs and Spokes" project to provide firmer foundations in developing countries for trade negotiating. Many small island states stand to benefit from this initiative. More open and fairer trade can help immensely all developing countries.

Trade liberalisation is a vital way of improving the outlook and long term economic viability of small island states. It will be important, though, that those barriers are tackled in a way that does not leave small island states suddenly afloat like dinghies without oars in a stormy ocean.

The Commonwealth has been working on this. We are, for instance, promoting a fund that channels financial support to the private sector in small states. This fund will provide a safety net for those who risk losing their livelihoods and will help producers and exporters to diversify and develop more competitive industries.

We must continue to work to remove the barriers that prevent you from selling your commodities — particularly processed and packaged goods — to rich countries.

We also help our small member states cope with the growing problem of international recruitment of their scarce teachers and nurses.

Every year, small states spend millions of dollars training teachers, doctors and nurses, only to lose them to wealthier countries, which can afford to pay them more. This can often have a disastrous effect on a poor and small country's capacity to educate its people and provide decent health care. That is why the Commonwealth has developed codes of

conduct to ensure that international recruitment is carried out in an ethical way, which takes into account the needs of developing countries.

The Commonwealth is also promoting distance education in small states. To that end, the Vancouver-based Commonwealth of Learning is in the process of establishing a Virtual University for Small States, which will help bridge the learning gap in countries where education resources are limited.

We also work on a range of programmes to help our small states strengthen their economic resilience. In the past few years, we have played an important role in facilitating tourism and investment in small states and we have been assisting our member states in the implementation of international anti-terrorism measures.

And we are looking at what must be done in the longer term to strengthen our advance preparedness for natural disasters. Yesterday, I met with the Secretaries-General of the Caribbean Community, the Indian Ocean Commission and the Pacific Islands Forum to examine ways in which we can collectively reduce the future impact of natural disasters by strengthening advance warning and response networks across international borders. This is another concrete outcome we are expecting to flow out of this international meeting.

Finally, I'd like to draw your attention to an issue many of you will be aware of: the huge burden imposed on small states through complex reporting procedures. Whenever I visit a small member state, I hear the same view: "reporting on our programmes to international organisations and donor agencies is often unnecessarily complex and time consuming. It takes up a valuable part of our scarce resources and diverts our officials from the concrete work they do on behalf of our people." I would therefore urge all concerned to simplify and rationalise reporting requirements for small states. This, in itself, will help ensure resources in these countries are used more effectively. The Commonwealth Secretariat has already acted in this regard.

Together, we must continue to keep small island developing states at the centre of the development agenda and ensure our decisions today have a real, tangible impact on the lives of their inhabitants in years to come. May our successors meet in ten years time, two decades after the Barbados Plan was created, and congratulate us here for a realistic and effective job well done. We owe it to the people of Small Island Developing States everywhere in the world.