

Africa *woman*

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NO REALISTIC SOLUTION IN SIGHT ON ZIMBABWE

By Caroline Somanje & Sibongile Ncube, Abuja

WITH the Zimbabwe crisis causing no mean measure of anxiety among African delegations at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Queen Elizabeth II of Britain gave an opening speech that left many stones unturned and her audience yearning for more.

African leaders hoped the forum would offer solutions and a way forward to Zimbabwe's problems that have witnessed a drastic fall to its economy, rather than simply locking the country out of the meeting. Though this year's theme is Development and Democracy - Partnership for Peace and Prosperity, the Queen steered clear of the burning issue threatening to divide the Commonwealth along racial lines.

Critics saw it as re-affirmation that the Commonwealth is set to walk the same path it has over the years, operating more as a club determined to hang on to diplomacy rather than venture into radical thinking.

Officially opening the four-day meeting, the Queen dwelt on "other rather pressing issues pertaining her loyal members" and urged them to formulate strong policies that would go beyond discussion tables to make a difference in the lives of people in their respective countries.

In reference to this year's theme, she said: "Partnership is one of Commonwealth's attributes where both rich and poor, large and small work together for the common good in the eradication of poverty, removing trade barriers and combating terrorism.

"It is a daunting agenda, but I know you can progress if you address the issues with seriousness and commitment in order to re-affirm the Commonwealth's prominence on the international face," she told prime ministers and presidents from nearly one-third of the world's nations.

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SOLUTION: All eyes on commonwealth heads of government to come up with realistic strategies to halve poverty by year 2015

Send our children to school

By Sandra Nyaira, Zimbabwe

THE message was loud and clear: invest in education, not war. Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon was dumbfounded. He never thought African media women would go to such lengths to make their feelings known, especially in the heart of Scotland — in Edinburgh, a city far removed from rural Africa.

"I will carry your concerns to Abuja," he said at the October 2003 Commonwealth Education Ministers' meeting with the theme Closing the Gap in Access, Inclusion and Achievement. "All the issues that came out

of this meeting, the resolutions and things that need adoption will certainly be discussed in Abuja and I hope the leaders will respond favourably."

Africawoman is asking the same question of the leaders at CHOGM: will you invest in education and not war? We certainly hope so. Indeed, questions are being raised on why Australia and Britain, which invested so much in the war in Iraq, were allowed at this year's CHOGM when some would put it in the same category of Zimbabwe — countries that have errant group of leaders who have violated the human rights

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FOCUS ON COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF STATE MEETING – ABUJA

TANZANIA

Building a culture of peace in the world

By Jamillah Mwanjisi

THOUGH the United Nations has declared 2001-10 the international decade for the culture of peace and non-violence, there are few controls on the sale and delivery of heavy and small arms and weapons. Arms produced in the developed world, including some member states of the Commonwealth, continue to wreak havoc in countries as far apart as Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Ivory Coast.

Where have African governments failed? The answer lies in regional co-operation in controlling legal and illegal trade in arms, says Malcolm Harper, director of the United Nations Association of Great Britain and convener of Organisations of Commonwealth United Nations Association (Ocuna).

"There must be genuine efforts to stop trading and distribution of small arms and light weapons which kill people everywhere in the world," Harper said when addressing a meeting at the Commonwealth People's Forum. "Countries cannot continue to operate in isolation any more."

As a response to that challenge, Ocuna has prepared a proposal and recommendations for the Commonwealth Head of Government meeting that outlines the importance of the member states working together in controlling the buying, selling and distribution of arms within the Commonwealth.

Code of conduct

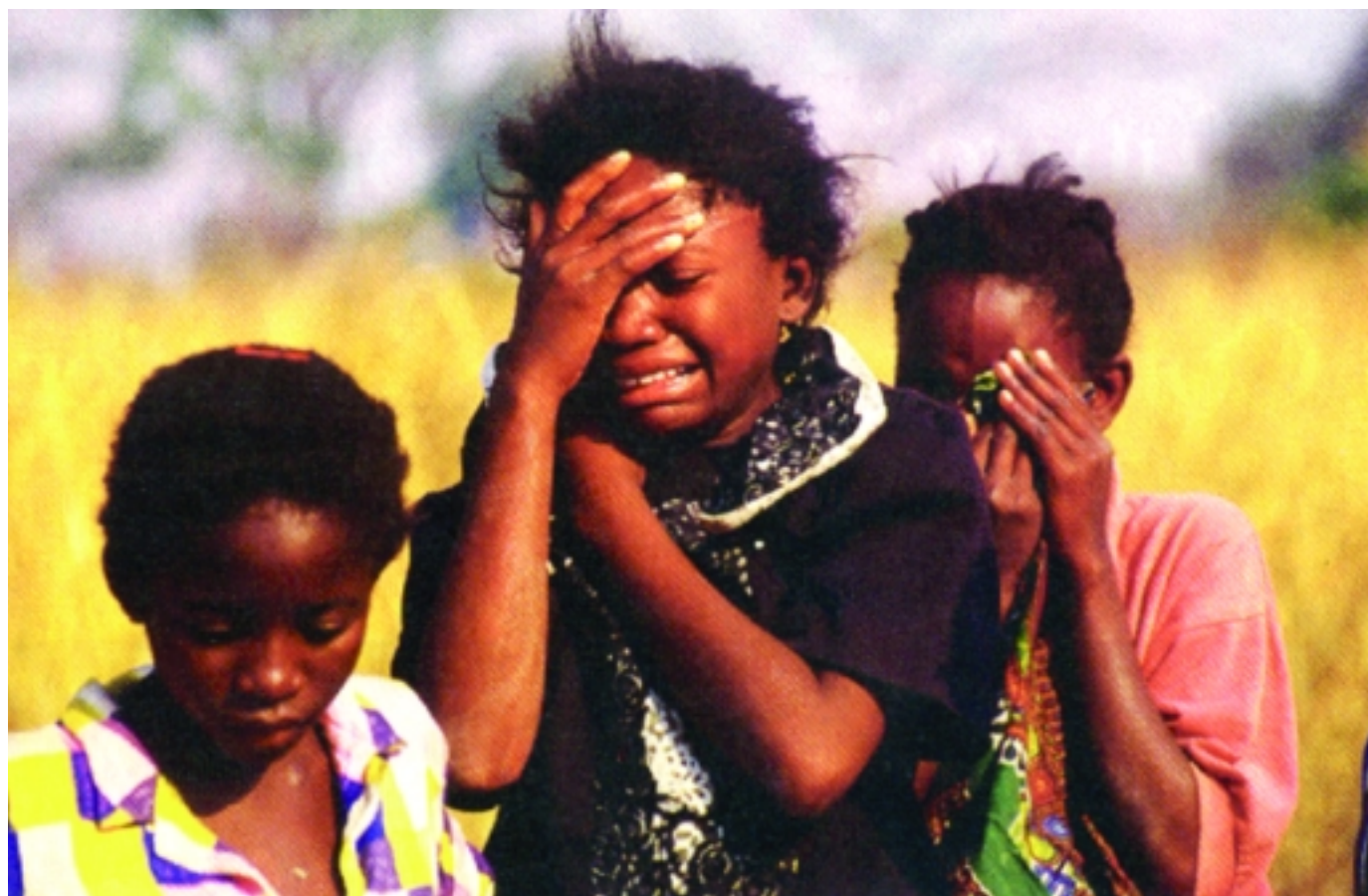
The proposal includes a draft Commonwealth Code of Conduct on heavy and small arms and light weapons. The code suggests the banning of arms transfer to any Commonwealth member state which is found to have gone against the Harare Declaration or which has been suspended from the Commonwealth.

In addition, the code proposes that recipient countries not use arms in genocide, ethnic cleansing, racial intolerance and other crimes against humanity.

The Code of Conduct wants the Commonwealth members receiving arms to first promise to vigorously investigate, prosecute and bring to justice those responsible for crimes against humanity and other abuses of human rights arising from the sale of the arms.

Furthermore, countries cannot buy arms unless they make it part of their training of the army, police and other law enforcement agencies that anyone ordered to commit crimes against humanity has a duty to refuse.

The document was first attached to an open letter to all Heads of States and other participants planning to attend the 2002 edition of CHOGM. Ocuna re-submitted the proposal to CHOGM Abuja, hoping it would be concluded. "We hope this time our heads of state will find time to at least start discussing the importance of having a code of conduct," says Harper. "They should talk about it and assign experts to produce a draft for negotiations."



SORROW: The gun trade has left many children orphans as it fuels wars

UGANDA

Guns and vanilla: it's a great way to make money

By Margaret Nankinga

MARY Musoke has plenty to smile about these days: she has built her own house, taken her children to school and still has some money for her basic needs — thanks to the golden crop vanilla. She is a widow with 11 children and lives in Kirowooza in Mukono, Central Uganda.

Ever since her husband died in 2000, her sole source of livelihood has been her vanilla crop. To the hard working people of Mukono, vanilla represents a new way of life rather than just another crop.

The guns that once created instability in the district have found new uses: they are all being used to protect the golden crop from thieves. In the past three years, there has been a marked improvement in the people's living standards as farmers earn as much as US\$6 per kilogramme of quality vanilla beans. Ugandan vanilla is sold to Europe and America.

Susan Karungi of the Uganda National Vanilla Association says that the present high gains are a result of a shortage created by poor weather in Madagascar, the world's largest producer. "These very high prices are bound to go down sooner rather than later," she says. "The Ugandan farmer can still reap better farm gate prices rather than coffee or tea, given that demand for Africa's vanilla still continues in developed countries and for as long as these countries open their markets wider for Africa."

It has been Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon's persistent cry to

rich countries to open their markets to produce from poor countries and to reduce subsidies for their agricultural produce as a way of fighting poverty and bringing about development in Africa.

The vanilla story demonstrates that guns can be put to better use making people richer rather than driving them into deeper poverty through pointless wars. These days, there is a new "war" cry in Uganda: "Grow more vanilla!"

Musoke is one of many farmers who employ gunmen to protect their crop from thieves. When President Yoweri Museveni visited Nakifuma, one of the sub-counties in Mukono, he promised to give the farmers more armed security personnel to protect their farms.

With the vanilla growing trend nicely settled, local people's efforts are geared towards a bigger share of the European market. Poverty is one of the major causes of strife and insecurity in many African countries. McKinnon's statement on the eve of the ill-fated Cancun ministerial conference is worthy of note: "As long as the US, Europe and Japan continue dishing out farm subsidies at the rate of \$1 billion a day, developing nations stand no chance of trading their way out of poverty. This is not only trade injustice, it is trade apartheid."

Resort to guns

When people fail to live by the hoe, they will most likely resort to living by the gun, causing strife and insecurity and thus more poverty in the region. If terrorism is to be

stopped in Africa, developed countries should start by giving highest priority to securing early agreements on agriculture.

The Coolum communique coming out of last year's CHOGM in Australia emphasised the importance of trade liberalisation and access to markets for developing countries anxious to overcome poverty.

The heads of government called for the removal of barriers to exports and the elimination of trade-distorting subsidies, including agricultural subsidies.

When this is done, guns in Africa will be put to their rightful use — protecting people and their wealth instead of creating wealth for the few who grab political power through the back door. As long as the European vanilla market remains open to Ugandan produce, people's standards of living will improve as they gain more from the crop, thus cutting the temptation to turn to the gun as a source of power and wealth.

The Commonwealth heads of government assembled in Abuja must make a clear commitment to targeting poverty as a way of fighting terrorism, strife and insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa.

Africa is still waiting for a deal that will lift its people out of poverty. When Europe and the US reduce agricultural subsidies, Mary Musoke and other women will continue selling their vanilla and continue educating their children. More guns in Uganda will be redeployed on farms rather than to fuelling wars that have led to countless killings that have left many women homeless, raped and mutilated.

GHANA

Human rights are not negotiable

By Rebecca Kwei

FOR the first time, Commonwealth leaders have been faced upfront with human rights issues in their countries. Civil society meeting under the auspices of three organisations in Abuja prior to the arrival of the heads of state held the Commonwealth Human Rights Forum to provide a platform for raising vital and urgent human rights issues.

Organised by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, the Legal Resources Consortium and the Nigerian Human Rights Commission and supported by the British Council, the forum is linked to the Commonwealth Human Rights Network.

But the question being asked here is how much progress can be expected from the same governments that have signed international human rights conventions yet continue to violate the rights of their citizens — especially women, children and displaced persons?

While Nigeria is hosting CHOGM, it serves as a safe haven for former Liberian president Charles Taylor, who has been indicted for war crimes in Sierra Leone. The 40-page report renewed crackdown on freedom of expression speaks of killings, arrest, detention, ill-treatment, torture and other forms of harassment and intimidation of real or perceived critics of the government over the past two years. Most of these abuses have been carried out by police or by members of the State Security Service.

No free pass

“Commonwealth leaders meeting in Abuja should not give Nigeria a free pass on human rights,” says Peter Takirambudde, executive director of the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. “Even though military rule has ended, Nigerians still cannot express themselves freely without fear of grave consequences.”



EXERCISING THEIR RIGHTS: children have the right to play

At the human rights forum, Chibogu Obinwa, senior programme officer of Baobab for Women's Human Rights, called on African countries within the commonwealth to ratify the optional protocol on women's rights in the Africa Charter adopted by heads of state and government this year. She says: “This is a comprehensive document which deals with women's rights issues and the first regional instrument that gives substantive rights and justice to women at the regional level. It also recommends monogamy as a preferred form of marriage.”

The protocol also addresses gender violence, including female genital mutilation. Obinwa calls for the establishment of a commission inside national human rights institutions to ensure that gender issues are not swept under the carpet.

Zimbabwe, widely perceived as the wild child of the Commonwealth, came in for its own share of criticism. Participants argued that the country should remain suspended and the Mugabe government pressured to end human rights abuses.

Women terribly abused

Nokuthula Moyo, representing the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum told *Africawoman*: “In the past three years, women have been terribly abused. Many have been gang-raped and others have suffered sexual abuse and been tortured, with soft drink bottles and pieces of wood pushed into their private parts.”

Women perceived to belong to the opposition or those whose relatives are political activists have been targeted in particular. Moyo

said her organisation, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, offers medical care, counselling and legal aid to abused women, “but there is a limit to what NGOs can do. We ought to fight to prevent these abuses from occurring.”

Participants called for the establishment of human rights institutions according to the “Paris principle” and for governments to put in place mechanisms to monitor how member countries implement human rights conventions, especially those that affect women, children, the disabled and minorities.

Only 17 of the 54 Commonwealth member states have human rights institutions. Human rights have been described as universal, indivisible and interdependent. The Abuja human rights forum added another dimension: “Human rights – our common wealth!”

By Betty Muriuki

A VERY enthusiastic group of legislators converged on the National Assembly in Abuja for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's (CPA) meeting and their agenda – to discuss ‘Women in Decision-making.’

Indeed, one of the facts that has stood out clearly from discussions at different sessions in Abuja is the fundamental role that women play in development. It is evident that, if the Millennium Development Goals set by the UN are to be achieved, women's participation and empowerment in development matters need to be deliberately sought and promoted.

The attainment of those goals requires a gender balance that ensures that there are sufficient women in leadership and policy-making positions so that they can influence such policy in greater favour of women and spur other women into active involvement in

No new noise for women

development.

And so the members of the CPA met to consider ways in which the Commonwealth's target of at least 30 per cent of women legislators in every member country, which has been met by very few, could be achieved. (Rwanda, to its great credit, has the greatest proportion of women in Parliament, at 48 per cent).

A very noble cause indeed, and the legislators went about it with gusto.

They made all the right noises. They noted that finances were probably the greatest obstacle in raising the number of women in parliament; that most businesses and large firms and corporations were owned by men, who were most likely to give campaign funds to fellow men; that women were

economically disadvantaged compared with men, and so their campaigns were often less flowery and effective than those put up by men.

The MPs – most of who were women – recommended the setting up of funding bases to give financial support to political candidates, ensuring that they are highly visible before and during the campaigns. Problem is, this is the same solution that has been recommended at numerous other forums that seek to promote involvement of women in political leadership. Many other obstacles and the solutions sought, sounded like a replay of earlier meetings, and one was left wondering whether anything new was to be expected of the CPA meeting or, indeed, the entire CHOGM.

A major complaint that has

emerged from the CHOGM is about the unwillingness of heads of state to engage face-to-face with civil society during the conference. Yet ironically, governments expect non-governmental organisations to implement program that will move them closer to some of the targets they have set for themselves.

The CPA meeting identified lack of education as another stumbling block to the rise of women in political leadership. They noted that women who did not have sufficient education, lacked self-confidence to venture into politics, and that education would ensure they were able to tackle and articulate issues knowledgeably on the campaign trail and in parliament. They recommended that government collaborate with NGOs to educate

women on matters related to human rights, development and citizenship.

They also wanted civil society to be involved in capacity building to enable those elected to cope with the technicalities of parliamentary language and rules.

All the right noises. Problem is, these are the very same noises that have been made at such high-level international forums for decades. Year in, year out, meetings are held to discuss the same issues, always a similar list of solutions is put forward.

Granted, some of the solutions that have been recommended have borne fruits, such as legislating affirmative action to ensure that a certain percentage of women get into their national assemblies. In Nigeria, for instance, the nomination fee was waived for women candidates, while in South Africa, the ruling African National Congress requires that one third of its parliamentarians be women.

EDITORIAL

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Africawoman is produced by 80 women journalists from Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Nigeria who meet in a virtual newsroom once a month. The information produced is then linked to community radios throughout Africa to reach grassroot women.

Commonwealth must go beyond mere talk

When African elders meet, their people look up to them with great expectations. This is only fair and just. They are, after all, the heads of their villages and are mandated to make decisions and seek solutions to the problems of their people.

So it is with the Commonwealth heads of government. Every two years, this group of elders meet against a backdrop of pressure from their each other and from their people to try and iron out some of the thorny issues affecting members of the Commonwealth. They go into seclusion for a weekend and emerge with a communiqué that they all pledge to respect.

Talking is all very well. But with the challenges of modern times, the people of the Commonwealth have come to a point where they expect their leaders to do more than issue statements that amount to diplomatic platitudes.

At this forum, they appear to have neatly side-stepped the thorny issues raised by the suspension of Zimbabwe from the prestige grouping. We at *Africawoman* believe that meeting in Abuja and going away without a resolute course of action on Zimbabwe amounts to shirking our responsibility to help the people of that country through a difficult patch of their history.

As things stand, it is the people of Zimbabwe who are paying the price of the stand-off. Robert Mugabe has reached that stage of life where it no longer matters what the world thinks of him. Besides, he lives well above the inflation bracket and is unlikely to be hurt by the economic crisis in that country. It is the women and children of Zimbabwe who will bear the burden of isolation. Already, even the elderly women are travelling long distances from their homes to neighbouring countries such as Malawi and South Africa in search of a livelihood.

If it is true that the Mugabe government could do with pressure to fall back in line, then his colleagues in the Commonwealth should find ways of doing so without hurting the poor citizens who have little control over their leader's intemperate outbursts. Questions are also being asked over what some would call the selective application of punishment by the Commonwealth. As things stand, there are quite a number of leaders in the Club who have a less than perfect record but appear to be in favour because they are willing to play the game according to the present international political alignments.

It is such seeming double standards that have gained Mugabe sympathisers across Africa. The people of the Commonwealth will be greatly aided by a systematic approach to resolving differences. Here we have an opportunity to set up uniform standards and responses to the challenges brought about by the need for good governance and threats such as terrorism. Yet average Africans increasingly feel that organisations such as the Commonwealth do not so much as offer peer review as offhand condemnation of lesser endowed members such as the Africans.

The relations between the rich and poor in the Commonwealth have been put under great strain in recent times by international challenges such as terrorism, trade and investment and the brain drain. When it comes to the crunch, there has often been a feeling that, Commonwealth or not, there is not sufficient support to be expected from our brothers and sisters in the developed world when it comes to the crunch.

Clubs such as the Commonwealth are of value as an opportunity to hold each other's hands through the good and the bad, particularly at a time when Africa is struggling through the challenges of democracy. That means that Commonwealth leaders must be ready to get their hands dirty. Otherwise, they risk being condemned as simply a gathering for a tea party rather than a serious political, economic and social force.

POINT OF VIEW

Get women out of poverty, then things will fall into place

By Margaret Nankinga, Uganda

A group of 13 people sit at a round table at the Yar' Ardua centre in Abuja, discussing strategies to halve the number of people living in poverty by the Millennium Development Goal of 2015. "Cynics ask which half of the population to get out of poverty first and which half to leave," says Ezra Mbogori of the Zimbabwe-based Mwelekeo wa NGO.

But having heard from Denys Correl of the International Council on Social Welfare in the UK on the problems that civil society and poor countries face in trying to develop their communities, the question turns out not to be rhetorical after all. It is important, he says, that poor governments in Africa take a decision on those to develop first so that they may, in turn, help pull the others out of the muck.

Poor countries are alone in this, and the challenges are daunting: there is little or no accountability in government, there has been a drop in NGO funding and a diversion of resources to campaigns such as the war in Iraq. Poor countries face the challenge of finding new strategies within the limited means they have.

This is where the question of which half of the population to get out of poverty first ceases to be cynical and becomes top priority for governments. Besides the cutback in funding due to the situation in Iraq, Correl argues, most poor countries are also fighting their own civil wars — leaving very little to spend on development and fighting poverty.

So, when push comes to shove, who should come first? The answer was categorical: women. Uganda and Ghana come in for kind words.

They are cited as the leaders of the pack in Africa, where civil society has made significant efforts to fight poverty. This is supported by MDG data, which shows that Uganda's Gross Domestic Product has improved from US\$1055 per capita in

1990 to \$1490 in 2001; Ghana's has improved from US\$1848 in 1990 to \$2250. Nevertheless, the Commonwealth reports that the rate of eradicating poverty is slow in the two countries.

In both countries, however, civil society has spearheaded the fight against poverty and women's organisations have been at the forefront of the campaign. So, when it comes to choosing which 50 percent to get out of poverty first, it has to be women — especially since women provide most of the basic needs in Africa.

Yet most African women have been hampered economically because of gender imbalances inherent in patriarchal systems, poor policies and cultural discrimination. Efforts to improve their economic status will have a multiplier effect as they have become increasingly the sole breadwinners of their

families as men go to war, die of Aids or neglect their family responsibilities.

Warren Nyamugasira of National NGO Forum Uganda says that in order to sustain development and move at a faster pace, there is dire need to involve more grassroot people. The best way to do this is by first demystifying development technicalities.

He adds: "These donor countries have been playing one poor country against

the other. If you tell them that some policies like privatisation do not work, they refer you to another poor country where they say it has worked when in actual fact it hasn't. What we are doing is trying to develop a new poverty eradication strategy and then sell it to them."

Although the civil society, poverty eradication and the millennium development goals workshop raised some possible solutions to Africa's poverty, the participants seemed not to have much of a voice outside of the meeting room. As Correl says: "Governments object to being measured, civil society does not have anyone to talk to and the heads of governments are going into closed sessions — shutting out accountability."

So, when push comes to shove, who should come first? The answer was categorical: women.



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Lessons in leadership for MPs

Military dictatorship and bad governance has made country one of world's most corrupt

By Nkiru Okoro, Nigeria

INDIAN parliamentarian Prabhu Rau had some choice words for her fellow leaders at CHOGM: "It is a great irony that the people of the world die of poverty, malnutrition and diseases in the face of colossal wealth. Many citizens of developing countries cannot get two meals a day. Poverty anywhere in the world is a great threat. This situation is a negation of our perception of the whole universe as one big happy family where our common goal as a family of nations can be achieved."

They are words that this year's host of CHOGM would be well advised to pay heed to. Nigeria ranks among the last 50 countries in the human development index with the highest levels of youth unemployment and adult under-employment. Years of military dictatorship and bad governance, over-dependence on oil and total neglect of agriculture has made Nigeria indolent, poor and one of the most corrupt countries in the world. It is second only to Bangladesh in this list of shame.

It has dropped from 48th position in the human development index in 1979 to 176th today — hardly to be compared with Malaysia, Indonesia, North Korea and Singapore. "I

get amazed at the level where Nigeria is and wonder where we have gone wrong," says President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Coming from decades of military dictatorship, bad governance and misrule, Nigeria — like South Africa during the apartheid regime — was a pariah state with an irresponsible and greedy elite that accumulated a huge debt burden. It was a nation in crisis by the time of return to democracy in 1999.

Disgrace to capitalism

"The Nigerian elite is a monumental disgrace to the history of capitalist development anywhere on earth," says the special adviser to the president on policy monitoring and evaluation, Julius Ihonvbere. "It has failed in everything it has tried to manage, so why do we need to keep subsidising them?"

The government is now grappling with challenges such as privatisation borne out of the colossal failure of government enterprises — from the National Electric Power Authority, Nigerian Airways, Nicon Hilton Hotel and Nigerian National Shipping Line to Nigerian Railway. In 1979, the shipping line had 19 vessels; in 1999, it had nothing to show for two decades in business. Nigerian Airways had 32 aircraft in 1979 and had none flying at

NIGERIA

all by 1999. Said Obasanjo, in trying to justify the sale or privatisation of Nigerian Airways: "What I owe Nigerians is not necessarily Nigerian Airways but a safe and secure air transportation at a competitive price."

Nigerian Railway needs 250 million naira (\$1.85million) every month to pay pensioners and 110 million naira (\$.8million) to pay current staff but generates only 30 million naira (\$.2million) every month. Says Ihonvbere: "Before 1999, investors would not come in here, tourists would not come in here, salaries were not being paid, the infrastructure was in a state of total decay, human rights were grossly abused, and people were leaving in fear. Today, investors have brought in over 350 billion naira (\$2.59million) in various sectors, especially telecommunication."

Ihonvbere's upbeat outlook has not stopped a growing disenchantment with the government. Despite a strike between July and August to fight the deregulation of the downstream oil sector, the government defied the people's voices and increased petroleum prices first from 26 naira to 34 naira and then 43 naira per litre. This has put a

great deal of pressure on women and their families. The cost of transportation has risen alongside the cost of doing business. This one act has raised serious questions about the government's claims that it is building a people-oriented government.

Besides, a Nigerian public turned cynical by years of misrule remains sceptical about the privatisation programme. Many argue that nowhere in the world has there been privatisation of parastatals to the extent seen in Nigeria. In fact, civil society argues that there is a "grand plan to sell Nigeria to the privileged elite who have constituted themselves into cabals".

Says Ayo Atsenuwa of the Legal Research and Resource Development Centre: "With democracy, we are certainly enjoying more freedom, but a lot is still expected of the government. We cannot rest until our youths are employed, more jobs are created for the adult population and there is food every day on the plate of every Nigerian."

The Nigerian government may want to consider borrowing a leaf from countries such as South Africa and India. The former has adopted stringent economic restructuring programmes to enable the black majority control some of the economic affairs of their coun-

try. In a parliamentarian's interactive workshop, South African MP Naledi Pandor said of the country's debts: "These debts were not ignored. Steps were taken to reduce them. Some of the gains of the South African government in addressing these debts led recently to grants from creditors to address the public works system in South Africa."

Poverty eradication

Rau says successive Indian governments have since independence backed poverty eradication plans with laws and support at all levels of government.

"Poverty alleviation programmes to generate employment, improve income and so on have been followed to the letter so much that, since independence, India has not had any famine, drought, or starvation of citizens."

In a democracy, Rau says, parliamentarians have a responsibility to apply pressure on the government of the day to tackle the problems of their people. Transparency, good governance and peace and tolerance have helped combat corruption and fostered wealth creation. It should not be an impossible target for African governments — if they can marshal sufficient political will to do so.

Why hasn't the dream of democracy been achieved in the past decade in Africa

By Pilirani Semu-Banda

WORN out after staying too long in the sun, Manesi Makolija declares that she has grown poorer over the past decade. In 1994, she had a thriving grocery. It ran into trouble three years after Malawi turned democratic. Now she sells fritters in Blantyre, the commercial capital. "Our currency has been on a losing streak since 1994 and I can no longer afford to buy goods for my shop," she says. "I can't run a shop any more and I have been reduced to selling fritters in the streets, where I sit in the sun all day long."

Ten years ago, the Malawi kwacha traded at four to the dollar; now it stands at 109 to the dollar. In Makolija's area, most residents can no longer afford three meals a day. They are lucky to have "some fruit" in the morning, then skip lunch and try for a solid evening meal. "It seems like this democracy has made us poorer than ever before," she says.

In July last year, thousands of Malawians were reported to have died of starvation — the very first time ever in the country. Lilongwe MP Daniel Mlomo told parliament

Yes to democracy, no to poverty

MALAWI

that 631 people died in his constituency within 10 months due to poverty related ailments. The country has also seen people camp at churches and district headquarters in search of food. It is also not uncommon to see people line up by the roadside waiting for President Bakili Muluzi to give them handouts as he travels the country.

Solution to poverty

Democracy has become the in-thing in most of Africa in the past decade, with leaders seen as dictators being dumped after being accused of trampling on the rights of their people and causing them economic misery. Democracy was seen as the solution to poverty and

suffering and the beginning of peace and prosperity. But has this dream been achieved in the past decade in Africa?

In the case of Malawi, it would appear that the dream of democracy is tainted — which is a major disaster after the expectations attending the downfall of the autocratic Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who ruled from 1964 to 1994 and died in 1997.

At the moment, Malawi is going through a complete reversal of fortunes economically: it has a low human development index, a life expectancy of 37.5 years and 41.7 percent of the population living below the poverty line. Zahra Nuru, United Nations Development Programme resident representative here, says that poverty has wors-

ened in democratic Malawi, making it one of the 60 countries worldwide that are poorer than they were at the beginning of the 1990s. Malawi will not be able to meet the 2015 goals of reducing maternal mortality by three-quarters, cutting by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and reducing the deaths of under-fives by two-thirds.

Nuru adds: "Regrettably, the picture is also gloomy in many other parts of Africa and the world; 60 countries are poorer than they were a decade ago, and we worry that 34 of them will not meet even half their millennium goals." These include Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique and Nigeria. All the countries have enjoyed the onset of democracy

and also failed to achieve the key capabilities for human development.

Unless governments are able to demonstrate to their citizens that they are taking successful action on such basic issues as food security, education, jobs and crime, the global expansion of democracy seen in the 1990s may go into reverse. The 2002 Human Development Report says that unless something is done to reduce poverty, people in poor countries may lose confidence in democracy. "Already, there have been serious setbacks in many African countries," says the report. "Nearly half of the elected government cannot yet be described as fully democratic."

So what are these poor countries to do since democracy does not appear to have helped them much? Malawian President Bakili Muluzi keeps saying people "don't eat democracy". He means that democracy alone cannot lead to development and prosperity. The UNDP says that unless there are radical changes in policies, attitudes, mindsets and political and technical commitment, the poor of Africa will remain precisely that way.

FOCUS ON COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF STATE MEETING – ABUJA



JOY OR AGONY : CHOGM needs to deal with the HIV/AIDS pandemic that has left grandmothers raising their grandchildren

By Barbara Kalunga, Zambia

Representatives of rural women have dismissed the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Abuja as just another talk shop at which they are not considered as partners in the creation and distribution of wealth. They are now questioning how common this wealth is.

Women, who constitute more than half the population in many countries, are generally rated among the poorest when they are in fact the major players in most economic activities involving agriculture; these include food production, processing and management and, ultimately, food security.

"We rural women can create and distribute this common wealth so that we can eradicate poverty to ensure every member of the Commonwealth benefits," says Bisi Ogunleye, founder and executive director of Country Women Association of Nigeria.

Unless rural women are recognised as major players and partners in development, especially in Africa, poverty levels will remain high. Most women here have little access to credit to enable them raise their businesses beyond the level of petty trade. They rarely are able to own land in a cultural milieu that ensures ancestral lands are handed to men, which means that they are unable to determine how best it is used. This is critical when it comes to cash crops, where women and children provide the greatest labour but have little say when it comes to payments, which routinely go to registered owners of the land.

Activists in Abuja want more women in decision-making positions and equal opportunities for them to have some control over the distribution of wealth. "Our question is: who makes wealth and uses it?" says Ogunleye. She dispels as a "created myth" the idea that low levels of education have translated into limitations when it comes to financial services. According to Ogunleye, women have had their traditional way of creating wealth and managing finances although governments regard informally-educated women as illiterate. This, she says, is responsible for unequal distribution of wealth and stagnation in development in Africa — cardinal issues that leaders ought to address at gatherings such as CHOGM.

Country Women Association of Nigeria strives to ensure changes in the financial sector so that it becomes favourable to rural and poor urban women by applying African traditional norms and practices in

How common is our common wealth?

financial management as a way of rising out of poverty. With over 260,000 beneficiaries, the association started as a micro financier and is now registered as a bank with the Nigerian government and hopes to spread to Kenya, Uganda, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire.

The Country Women Association's strategy is an attempt to upgrade the old traditional financial systems and micro financing that exists among women. In Zambia, for example, multiple micro finance organisations have emerged in the name of assisting poor women. Finca Zambia targets women with small businesses, mostly in urban areas. Small loans managed by women beneficiaries in groups are given on a weekly repayment agreement.

But some have questioned how effective these services are at improving the lives of poor women, who get as little as 300,000 kwacha (US\$60) each for improvement of businesses. Some critics have urged that such meagre amounts are unlikely to help the poor improve their standards of living; instead, they end up on the family table and other necessities such as health and education. Though women are renowned for a low rate of default in payments, critics have argued that the strict conditions have turned women into "slaves" of the micro credit organisations.

Since these loans are given to women who run their own small businesses, repayment becomes even more difficult when their businesses do not do well or

they are unable to trade. "What we are teaching these women is not to allow their businesses to be sick once they get sick," says Sola Adesina, coordinator of the Oyo State chapter of the Network of African Rural Women Association in Nigeria.

According to Adesina, women with problems are discouraged from diverting money obtained from the bank and instead get separate loans to cater for such emergencies. Women must be empowered socially, economically and politically if a major breakthrough is to be made — issues that are largely absent on the CHOGM menu, where women are hardly ranked as equal partners.

And this despite the fact that a report by the Commonwealth expert group on development and democracy, Making Democracy work for pro-poor development, reports that weak financial policies in developing countries negatively impact on women. It identifies the need for a stable macro economic environment as a condition to improve lives through effective pro-poor development policies. "Financial stability can additionally help create an environment in which small firms and family businesses in developing countries are stimulated to improve," says the report.

Some argue that what women need is not necessarily credit but a recognised banking system that should be upgraded from the traditional financial management system at community level to a recognised structure.

Ogunleye challenges leaders in developing countries within the Commonwealth community to consider allocating five percent of their national budgets to rural financing, particularly for women. "With the application of traditional education, the allocation should go to financing women, who should be trusted to run the banks because we are the ones who create wealth and better know how to distribute the our common wealth," she adds.

African leaders have restricted wealth to acquisition of money and physical structures.

"Nations and policy makers are always talking about money as wealth," Ogunleye told *Africa woman*. "Wealth is knowledge, dignity, recognition of ability and capacity in an individual as well as freedom to use what you have."

Until this is realised, no meaningful development will take place and huge sums of money will continue being spent on meetings official meant for strategising and reviewing what is never done. End result? No tangible improvement in the lives of the people.

ZIMBABWE

There's only one way to bridge the gap between rich and poor

By Sibongile Ncube

BACK in 1964, Kwame Nkrumah argued that the real global issue was the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. Nearly four decades later, his words still ring true as most African countries still play second fiddle on the world's economic playing field. It need not be that way. By building a transparent, rules-based international trading system, the Commonwealth can go a long way to help developing countries pull themselves out of poverty.

The Commonwealth Business Forum and the business community in general can provide that extra level of horsepower to bring about a multilateral trading structure based on fairness and equity.

Given the importance of fair trade, a review of the breakdown of trade talks at Cancun should be one of the main items on the agenda for Commonwealth heads of state — the object being to try and bring the talks back on track.

Says Secretary-General Don McKinnon: "For poor nations, trade offers the quickest and most effective route toward development. That is why it is vital for them to have access to the rich countries' markets. But, for this to happen, the world needs to agree on international trade rules that create a level playing field."

Cancun disappointment

Failure to agree on such rules in Cancun last September was a disappointment all round. McKinnon adds: "Many fear that if no deal is reached, this will sound the death knell of trade multi-lateralism. Instead of a fair rule-based international trading system, we will have a mish-mash of bilateral agree-



EMPHATIC: Don McKinnon says poor countries need access to rich country's markets.

ments, which in the long run is to no-one's advantage."

The Cancun talks collapsed after the developing nations opposed the tariff arrangements proposed by the developed countries.

The European Union and the United States tried to push the developing countries into agreement, but they held firm and refused to accept a bad deal.

Slash in subsidies

In the agriculture talks, poor nations had hoped for a slash in subsidies that rich countries pay their farmers, making it difficult for African farmers to compete in a global economy.

Oxfam's Phil Twyford said then: "World trade negotiations will never be the same again. This meeting has failed and the rich countries are to blame."

"The rejection of the trade talks by the developing countries has made Cancun a turning point. In the past, rich countries made deals behind closed doors without listening to the rest of the world."

Against this backdrop, poor countries are bound to lose if they

are forced to accept the terms of the bigger players; governments in the Commonwealth cannot afford to waste time when their populations are getting a raw deal from trade liberalisation.

Discussions need to be set in motion again and CHOGM offers an ideal opportunity to contribute to this.

As a multilateral body including countries at both ends of the development spectrum — the G8 countries on the one hand and the least developed countries on the other — the Commonwealth is uniquely placed to achieve a workable consensus on trade. Such a consensus could then be used as a basis to build broader agreement across the WTO constituency.

Disparate incomes

According to a report released in Abuja by the Economic Affairs Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the main difficulty developing countries face in trying to achieve economic growth and reduce poverty is that the current international trade system generates disparate outcomes, making the potential benefits hard to obtain.

Wealthy industrialised countries have been the beneficiaries of trade liberalisation as the developing countries, particularly those in Africa, still lag behind in the area of trade and investment.

A World Bank study estimated that sub-Saharan Africa, the world's poorest region, would lose two percent of its income following the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations.

The Expert Group of the Commonwealth believes that creating a transparent rules-based multilateral trading system is urgent for both development and democracy.

{Abuja Diary}

Press freedom under threat!

They came, 700 of them, from the local and foreign media. Accreditation was chaotic but they managed to get their passes. The passes only allowed them access to go to the media centre and at least the People's Forum.. Unfortunately they had no access to the conference centre where the Heads of Governments were to meet, it was by invitation only. Once the invitations were given, the journalists were not allowed to ask questions or conduct interviews...

So what is the point of accrediting journalists to get to a conference and not give them access to the hub of information? If this is not press freedom under threat in the Commonwealth, what else is?

During the opening ceremony, many journalists were locked out and reduced to sitting in the media centre to listen to the opening speech which, according to some, was the same old talk and nothing new. As if this was not enough, it was claimed by civil society that the media director vetted all press releases they sent to the media centre.

Don McKinnon's dilemma

AS he seeks another term in office as the Commonwealth's secretary-general, McKinnon's dilemmas have just begun.

At the Commonwealth People's Forum, he was at pains explaining why the Commonwealth heads of governments haven't followed the United Nations steps of discussing agendas of meetings with civil society. His answer was that heads of government wanted to keep everything "under control".

He admitted that governments fear surprises. But if that was the case, why would they agree to meet the Business Forum and not the People's Forum? Isn't it true that most countries in the Commonwealth, Kenya being a good example, have survived because of civil society's pressure on governments? Isn't it true that without involving the civil society, governments are doomed to failure?

Where are the beggars in Abuja?

AS the dignitaries began to arrive, the beggars started to disappear from the streets of Abuja, and the men in black replaced them. They have been kept away for the duration of the visit. Our camera crew bumped into two police vehicles and a lorry. The boys and girls in black would stop, pick up a beggar and hoist him or her into the lor-

ry.... Well this is what happens when your country hosts a major conference. Obasanjo probably wanted to impress his colleagues in the Commonwealth, hoping to portray a clean house and probably reduced poverty levels. But most African governments are used to doing this, sweeping the dirt under the carpet and hiding the reality from all 'distinguished' guests.

When President Bush visited Kampala Uganda early this year, all the people living within the radius of 20km from Entebbe Airport were paid to stay away from their homes for the duration of Bush's stay.

When former US president Bill Clinton visited Tanzania, and met with the heads of states from Kenya, Uganda and the host country, the leaders' sitting positions were all changed at one point, so that no-one was sitting in the same place as before. The streets were cleaned with soap and water, yet the people who pay the taxes do not enjoy such clean streets. Talk of irony...

When the VIPS came

Africawoman journalists in Abuja for CHOGM were due to meet the queen at the British Council offices, where *Africawoman* has pitched tent for the duration of conference.

But even before they met her, the journalists had already experienced the effect power of the monarch. Three *Africawoman* journalists were scheduled to arrive in Abuja at 2.30 pm on Wednesday December 3, but did not get there until 9.30 p.m. The plane was not faulty, nor was the delay created by the pandemonium at the Lagos' domestic airport, but it was all because the queen was landing. It is understandable that when a very important person arrives, there is a disruption, but does everything have to come to a stop? After all time is money, and if this adage is true, Abuja has lost revenue despite hosting an international conference.

Unfortunately that has never been the case. Granted, hosting an international conference comes with its problems including circling the air for two hours in the air, or moving around Abuja and not getting to your appointment on time simply because most roads are closed for 'security reasons'. Security is important but when you have to close all roads to ensure security then you might as well give people a holiday during such an event.

"For poor nations, trade offers the quickest and most effective route toward development. That is why it is vital for them to have access to the rich countries' markets. But, for this to happen, the world needs to agree on international trade rules that create a level playing field."

FOCUS ON COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF STATE MEETING – ABUJA

FROM PAGE 1

"The Queen also noted that attaining the Millennium Development Goals seems to be a distant dream for most Commonwealth members as the club battles to forge strong partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society — partnerships that would enhance development and democracy within the 54-member group."

Africa still faces the daunting challenges of poverty, hunger, debt, environmental degradation and HIV and Aids, she said, which are among the legacies that continue to bedevil the world and not just the Commonwealth. The Millennium Development Goals, which members of the Commonwealth undertook to push for under the umbrella of the United Nations, have posed great challenges for the continent, which is suffering from stagnant and declining economies.

She hoped that the approach of building partnerships and correcting imbalances in both wealth and power would lay a strong foundation for democracy. "Partnerships are crucial not only in the Commonwealth but the whole world,"

Queen stresses need for partnerships

she added.

Pushing for increased cooperation and partnerships among Commonwealth members would not be feasible, however, as long as there are continued opposing views among members on the way forward regarding the suspension of Zimbabwe, which is set to overshadow proceedings here.

The Queen said she was particularly struck by Commonwealth members' consultation on various issues, among them political problems — an indication of the confidence and trust they attach to the grouping. Perhaps Zimbabwe never consulted.

Earlier, host President Olusegun Obasanjo commended the Queen on the continued significance and support that she attaches to the Commonwealth which, he said,

provided a forum for economic reforms, fighting corruption, service delivery and privatisation.

He probably had Zimbabwe in mind when he said: "Nigeria conforms to the Commonwealth's principles and values of upholding democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, which are beneficial to all member states."

Problems drive agenda

He said the problems of HIV/Aids, improved global trade, good governance, corruption and transparency should drive the organisation's agenda this century. He added that the New Partnership for African Development (Nepad) would help leaders share experiences and usher in renewed determination for democracy and development in the Commonwealth.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon observed that with an imbalance of power between wealthy and poor countries, leaders and their people, the Commonwealth would ensure that all people become part of every decision because, "the fate of millions of people is left at stake when they are sidelined. More sentiments, envy and eventual violence develop, therefore peace cannot be sustained".

He said it was crucial for all countries, especially wealthy ones, to exercise flexibility, generosity and commitment in improving global trade where all Commonwealth members are incorporated.

"The current mentality of winning or losing must change because it is not about winning but that anyone can win as long as there is a display of commitment.

Trade is a powerful instrument for fighting poverty but democracy is the main key because democracy and development are inseparable. Hunger and frustration threaten democracy, which is a road map for the future."

CHOGM's previous host, Australian Prime Minister John Howard applauded Nigeria's return to the Commonwealth in 1999 after its suspension in 1995. He said Obasanjo fought for his country's return to the fold even at great personal risk.

Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth in March this year on allegations that President Robert Mugabe rigged his re-election. However, critics believe he got the boot because of his land reform programme that saw white-owned farms taken away and given to landless Zimbabweans.

Meanwhile, while African heads of government continue to enjoy their four-day retreat, the question still remains on whether the recommendations that come out of here would see their way to fruition for the benefit of millions of people who still cannot access their basic human rights.

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at
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Send our children to school

FROM PAGE 1

of their people and others across the world.

Civil society groups at the Commonwealth Peoples Forum took McKinnon to task on the promise he made in Edinburgh — that education would be used as a tool to end poverty. "Will the Commonwealth, in the same spirit that some member countries threw resources into ousting Saddam Hussein, commit itself to ending poverty through education?"

Africawoman has solicited the support of cross-party Members of the Scottish Parliament calling on the developed countries, especially Britain and the United States, not to re-direct funds initially meant for African development to the rebuilding of war-torn Iraq. Donning *Africawoman* T-shirts, the MSPs handed delegates at the conference copies of the publication calling on the developed world to stop selling weapons that in the end compromise basic civil rights and subsequently stop children from getting an education.

Over 50 million children in the poor Commonwealth countries are out of school. Organisations such as Oxfam also made huge contributions in trying to lure the education ministers and the Commonwealth into fulfilling their millennium goals for education by 2015. "Warm words will not put one extra child into school," said Malcolm Flemming of Oxfam. "The Commonwealth has an education crisis and rich countries must provide the funding they promised. All de-

veloping countries also need to prioritise getting children into school."

In the keynote address, Commonwealth educationist Amartya Sen said: "If we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure."

These sentiments were shared by many who attended the conference, who hoped that the heads of government meeting in Abuja would adopt strong measures to deal with the education crisis in the Commonwealth. Running concurrently with the conference was the first ever Youth Summit of Commonwealth students who came up with their own thoughts on how access to education could be improved in general.

Quality of education

These include the need to improve the quality of education, the need for young people to be directly involved in developing education systems, the selection of teachers, design and evaluation of resource materials and curriculum. Their views have been incorporated in a report being tabled before the Heads of State and Government this week-end.

The ministers identified six key areas they want their leaders to talk about. These are: dealing with gender disparities in education, mitigating the impact of HIV/Aids, supporting education in difficult circumstances, universal primary education, improving the quality of

education and using distance learning to overcome barriers.

Of great concern is the brain drain of teachers from the developing nations as countries such as Britain continue to dangle hefty pay cheques in front of poorly remunerated teachers and other professionals. McKinnon said the ministers' conference had agreed to set up a working group of senior Commonwealth officials to seriously look into this matter and look at ways through which countries like Kenya that have announced free primary education for all will not be set back by a shortage of teachers.

"We discussed the urgent need for Commonwealth countries to develop a clear code of conduct for teacher recruitment in the Commonwealth," he said. "This will see the emergence of a code on recruitment that will offer compensation to those countries losing their professionals to the rich countries."

The compensation can take the form of investment funds in teacher training, the training institutions themselves and other relat-

ed issues to ensure mass production of teachers. McKinnon says this matter will be fully debated by the heads of state and government with a view to reaching a decision by September 2004.

Also critical was the issue raised by *Africawoman* and other developing countries on how policies of the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund affect countries like Kenya that are being told to cut spending on education despite wanting to provide primary education to all children. McKinnon said the conference had recognised this widespread concern, which could lead to education being turned into just another commodity.

Leaders in Abuja should be able to affirm the paramount importance of safeguarding the values and standards of quality education. The secretary-general said it would be difficult for the Commonwealth alone to deal with trade-related issues since these required the presence of the US government, whose institutions like the IMF, were largely responsible for structural adjustment.



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