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HEADS OF GOVERNMENT
INTERIM REPORT
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Introduction

The postponement of the 26th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) scheduled to take place in Kigali, Rwanda, on 22 – 27 June 2020, is unfortunate but understandable. Even though Heads of Government are unable to meet face-to-face this month, we can still progress the aspirations of the Meeting by connecting, innovating and transforming, and by leveraging the Commonwealth Advantage to counter the economic fallout of COVID-19. In the circumstances it seems appropriate to release the Report now whilst its relevance remains most topical, rather than to await a reconvened event.

The impact of COVID-19 is being felt in every corner of the world, with leaders across the Commonwealth's 54 nations facing unprecedented challenges. To minimise the devastating socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, it is essential that we put aside nationalism and work together in the common interest of all humanity. As such, the values and aspirations of the Commonwealth remain as important as ever. Member countries have committed to work together to promote prosperity, democracy and peace, amplify the voice of small states, and protect the environment. We must not lose sight of these goals, nor of the need for cooperation and solidarity.

It was inevitable that the scheduled Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting would be deferred because of the Covid19 epidemic and it is to be hoped that a new date can be determined as soon as is feasible. Nevertheless, it is appropriate that this Report, prepared before the virus took hold, should be distributed now as a reminder of the great advantages that the Commonwealth brings to its members.

The agenda for the deferred event will be heavily influenced by recent global experience and no doubt, by the realisation that changes to networks, systems and procedures will be enduring consequences of the challenges faced by all countries. A key change that might be anticipated is that cooperation between countries will be an increasingly crucial factor in foreign policy. The modern Commonwealth is ideally characterised and equipped to thrive in the re-setting of how business will be done in this new World.

I am enthused by the evident optimism expressed by the individual contributors to this Report and I have no doubt that a future version, prepared to coincide with the rescheduled Heads of Government Meeting and with the experience of Covid 19 as a backdrop, will similarly recognise and support the relevance of this exceptional partnership of like-minded countries.

We look forward to a time when Heads of Government can once again convene face-to-face. In the meantime, we hope you find this publication beneficial.

Lord Howell of Guildford
COVID-19 is a challenge to global leaders without precedent in living memory. Its impact will be felt in every corner of the world, from the tragically high number of deaths to economic depression and the prospect of a radical restructuring of how goods, capital and people move from one country to another.

Leaders must urgently put aside narrow nationalism and short term, selfish considerations to work together in the common interest of all humanity.

As a former Secretary-General of the UN, I support the call from my successor António Guterres for an additional US$2 billion in humanitarian aid to tackle the pandemic, and for a global ceasefire to prevent the spread of the virus in conflict zones.

The UN Security Council set a good precedent during the Ebola crisis by declaring it to be a serious threat to international peace and security. COVID-19 is an even bigger threat, and demands even greater, sustained leadership from the Council.

This public health crisis should not be politicised. It would be unforgivable if the narrow and partisan interests of some permanent members undermine efforts to build a global consensus for peace at this time of existential crisis. If conflicts around the world are made worse by disease, depression and famine, all of us will lose.

Every part of the UN, from the Security Council and General Assembly to the WHO and other humanitarian agencies, needs to work together and be adequately resourced. Other multilateral organisations like The Commonwealth can also play a valuable role in coordinating an effective and equitable response to COVID-19. I urge all country leaders to consider how to develop a global governance system that can cope more effectively with any pandemics that may occur in the future.

Writing as a member of The Elders, the group of independent leaders founded by Nelson Mandela, I hope all those now in power can follow Mandela’s example and act with vision and compassion to overcome this crisis. They should recommit to the values of the UN Charter, and use other multilateral bodies including the G20, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to proactively support the world’s most vulnerable populations.

It is encouraging that G20 leaders have committed to implementing any necessary measures to stop the spread of the virus and to inject US$5 trillion into the global economy.

But, these pledges need to be translated into immediate, proactive assistance to vulnerable countries in Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. At the time of writing, countries here are not yet bearing the full brunt of the pandemic, but it could wreak an
even more devastating toll than the already tragic consequences in China, Europe and North America.

To ensure an effective recovery, this cooperation will need to be strengthened and sustained for some time. It is also crucial that border restrictions and closures, and pre-existing sanctions for countries like Iran, that has been severely hit by the pandemic, do not prevent critical medical equipment and supplies from being transported to where they are most urgently needed.

COVID-19 shines a harsh light on the many profound inequalities that scar our planet. Disparities of wealth between and within countries now risk being exacerbated even further by the pandemic.

Similarly, the constraints many countries have imposed on movement and assembly are understandable and necessary under the current circumstances, but legislators and the judiciary must bear in mind that, if not carefully addressed, they risk accentuating the marginalisation of vulnerable groups such as refugees, migrants and racial minorities.

Respect for human rights, solidarity and justice need to be at the heart of our response to COVID-19. We all have a responsibility as global citizens to stay vigilant and not allow authoritarian regimes to exploit the crisis to roll back rights and democratic safeguards.

Otherwise, we risk the prospect of a future in which rich countries have recovered and reinstate ‘normal’ patterns of social and economic interaction, but poorer states remain ravaged, with their citizens excluded and subject to new forms of discrimination.

Even before COVID-19 took hold, we were confronted by the existential threats of climate change and nuclear weapons. In January 2020, I attended the unveiling of the ‘Doomsday Clock’ in Washington DC, when the clock was moved closer to midnight than ever before.

The prospect of a similar confrontation between two or more nuclear-armed powers should horrified us all but is dangerously real, as we saw in 2019 between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Such tensions call for responsible global leadership and a careful, concerted attempt to strengthen multilateral frameworks around nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

The Doomsday Clock is still ticking, and these threats have been further aggravated since the outbreak of COVID-19. But, if the world can show the necessary courage and leadership today, we will be better placed to tackle equally grave challenges tomorrow.

“Multilateral organisations like The Commonwealth can play a valuable role in coordinating an effective and equitable response to COVID-19.”

“Multilateral organisations like The Commonwealth can play a valuable role in coordinating an effective and equitable response to COVID-19.”

“If the world can show the necessary courage and leadership today, we will be better placed to tackle equally grave challenges tomorrow.”
Fighting Mankind's Greatest Threats

Keith Rowley, Prime Minister of Trinidad & Tobago, deems the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change to be among the biggest threats ever to face mankind. He calls for governments to act now to help reduce the devastating impacts of these public health, economic and environmental crises.

At the point of writing, the world as we know it appears to be travelling through a dark, meandering tunnel.

We continued with various ongoing challenges at the opening of the decade. Threats of climate change and global warming brought grave predictions of impending ecological collapse. There were also concerns of over-population and over-consumption in the face of famine, food shortages and poverty, alongside the dread of infectious diseases and the rumblings among nations, raising fears of intense military conflicts.

In short, global concerns could have been summarised in the familiar terms of famine, plague and war – all once seen as the work of angry gods, malicious demons or nature’s incomprehensible handiwork, but at the dawn of the decade, turbulences were being confronted and transformed into solvable challenges.

While billions of people still remained hungry and malnourished, some surviving on less than US$2 a day, advances in the field of medicine, for instance, converted the critical AIDS crisis from a patient’s death sentence to a manageable, survivable condition.

Continuing human achievement and technological developments, for example in information and biotechnology, suggested that our eyes should turn to an evolving digital life in the ‘infosphere’ and horizons beyond.

It was felt that over the past century, the march of socioeconomic, political and technological developments had created human progress so significant that with big data at hand, we had begun to convert ourselves into digital humans and now warranting new human agendas.

We, in the Commonwealth – comprising almost one-third of the world’s population – were not untouched by these universal issues. We started off 2020 grappling with a broad agenda, inter alia, anticipating a post-Brexit world; the digital gap and economic transformation of member states; human rights and good governance; the strengthening of our
national security systems; measures to combat cybersecurity and terrorism – while maintaining international peace, the fundamentals of our democracies, the promotion of gender and youth equality and the overall upholding of our common values.

In the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, originally scheduled for June 2020, it was proposed that leaders working under the theme ‘Delivering A Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming’, would make fundamental adjustments to these pressing issues on the agenda.

Then came the novel COVID-19 virus upending our world, pushing us into that dark, seemingly unending tunnel. The pandemic, unpredictable and unparalleled, created both public health and economic crises. A grim spectre of a precipitous decline appeared. Volatile markets, constant waves of layoffs, unemployment, bankruptcies, the collapse of small businesses and the incalculable effects on vulnerable informal economies, all carry signs of a prolonged fall in global economic output.

Within weeks, international agencies acknowledged that the world economy had gone into recession, early observers suggesting that its effects could equal or be far worse than the financial crisis of 2008.

It was said that economic recovery efforts, in the short run, could prove unworkable and they might not be effective until way into 2021. Far worst, would be the human costs. The spread and daily increase in death tolls brought, established healthcare systems in some developed countries, to near collapse with many countries fearing that their essential social fabric could be destroyed.

To explain, some commentators sought parallels in the ‘Black Death’ of the 1330s, 20th century phenomena as the Spanish Flu, the ‘Great Depression’, the outbreak of Bird Flu, Swine Flu and Ebola, concluding that depending on the length and depth or eventual decline of COVID-19, its effects could be far more prolonged and have the worst-ever impact in modern history.

Because infectious diseases are known to arrive through chance mutations in pathogens, there are continuing fears that some unknown relative of COVID-19 could be awaiting us in the near future.

In March 2020, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described the pandemic as the worst crisis the world has experienced since the second world war. He also expressed fears of a protracted worldwide recession and the possibility that further international conflicts could be triggered. In a wider context, he saw it as a threat to the existence of humankind itself.

We expect that the effects of COVID-19 will be assessed eventually, not only in economic terms, but also in its global spread, death toll and social effects, particularly in underdeveloped countries. The virus now has prominence alongside climate change on the global agenda, and the UN Secretary-General has also determined that “both require a determined response. Both must be defeated”.

My position stands alongside that of the Secretary-General. I believe the fight must continue on both fronts. Neither the threat of the virus nor climate change should be given single or preferential attention on the global agenda, but both be pursued with equal zeal. I also share his call that “we will not fight climate change with a virus”.

However, we must not be distracted, for climate change has to be seen as mankind’s biggest war, along with the urgent issues of poverty, inequality, food supply and others facing every country on every continent today.

Our approach cannot be half-hearted in the face of increasing storms, disasters, threats of food, water scarcity and further fears. Later in 2020, The UN Climate Change Conference is scheduled to be held in Scotland, at which the World Meteorological Organisation Statement on the State of the Global Climate will be considered.

The physical evidence is clear. Climate change must be seen as mankind’s next manageable challenge and the world must act now.

“Neither the threat of the virus nor climate change should be given single or preferential attention on the global agenda, but both be pursued with equal zeal.”
The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 by all Commonwealth member states was an historic achievement. The landmark agreement provided a roadmap for a new global effort to end poverty and deliver peace and prosperity for all, on a healthy planet.

But even before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear that the promise of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) had not translated into sufficient change at the scale and speed needed to eradicate poverty, reduce emissions, create jobs and achieve gender equality by 2030.

The social and economic impact of COVID-19 will put us even further off track. The pandemic threatens to push more people into poverty and women in particular, to exacerbate climate change, increase the number of unemployed people, and to inflict significant economic damage on developing countries that do not have the financial tools to weather the storm.

It means that we need to push harder for the SDGs: the policies and programmes that we know will help us beat the pandemic and emerge on the other side of COVID-19 with stronger and more resilient communities and societies.

There has been progress since 2015, however, and none of that is wasted. Many countries have aligned their national policies with the SDGs and there is a fresh wave of new partnerships and initiatives. Diverse companies, organisations and institutions of all kinds have embraced the Global Goals as their blueprint, with many adopting green transition policies.

As we push through this global crisis, we must generate the international cooperation and solidarity needed to support developing countries to deal with the social and economic fallout and take the necessary steps to build back better. Front and centre of these efforts must be women’s leadership and gender equality. We need the benefits of sustainable development, from stronger health systems to clean energy,
to kick in as soon as possible. We cannot afford to wait another ten years.

Take the climate crisis. 2019 was the second warmest year on record and levels of carbon dioxide concentrations continued to rise. Ocean acidity is now 26 per cent higher than in pre-industrial times and is projected to increase by between 100 and 150 per cent by 2100. On the present trajectory, our climate will warm by 3°C this century, reversing decades of development progress and causing catastrophe for many around the world. The most vulnerable people will bear the brunt. We need immediate action from all sectors of society to reduce emissions, build climate resilience and ensure a just transition. The longer we delay action, the more difficult and more expensive it will be.

Time is also of the essence in our efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and reduce inequality. Despite massive progress since 1990, the pace of poverty reduction is slowing down as the world struggles to respond to entrenched deprivation, violent conflicts and vulnerability to natural disasters. Global hunger, which has declined for years, is again on the rise, leaving more than 820 million people around the world without enough food. The gap between rich and poor is growing, with more than two-thirds of all people living in countries where inequality has worsened.

Gender equality and the rights of women and girls are essential for poverty eradication. But, by any measure, we are off track. The global gender pay gap stands at an unrelenting 20 per cent. Women still spend three times as many hours as men each day in unpaid care and domestic work. And, only one in four parliamentarians worldwide are women. COVID-19 poses new threats to women’s rights and freedoms as its economic impact falls on informal sectors where women are over-represented. All over the world, we are seeing an alarming and significant rise in violence against women and girls in the home.

We have a steep mountain to climb and time is not on our side, but I believe we can still be the generation to end extreme poverty, win the race against climate change and conquer injustice and gender inequality. This will require all of us to undertake the most ambitious and concerted effort since World War II. From updating national development plans to realigning financing frameworks, governments and all stakeholders must revitalise their commitments to inspiring change.

In January 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched a Decade of Action for the Global Goals. It represents an opportunity to move the world into a new stage of accelerated implementation, action, solidarity and delivery, leaving no one behind. The whole UN system is responding to support countries to deal with the COVID-19 crisis in ways that will also help them achieve the overarching aims of the 2030 Agenda: peace and prosperity on a healthy planet.

Governments must lead the way with renewed urgency, but they simply cannot do this alone. We need to enlarge the circle and deepen the engagement of other stakeholders, from civil society to the private sector. We need to mobilise an unstoppable movement to transform our economies and our societies, to deliver fair globalisation.

Parts of this movement are already working hard on climate, on inequality and on gender equality. In the next decade, I hope these various strands and efforts will step up their ambitions and come together in mutually reinforcing coalitions for change. Together, they could build an unstoppable movement pushing for greater local and national action and for more effective international cooperation and stronger solidarity.

I urge Commonwealth Heads of Government to frame their conversations for immediate action on economic transformation, climate action, poverty eradication and gender equality, and around supporting such movements for transformative change.

It is time for greater urgency, ambition and excitement in our efforts to achieve the Global Goals. The Decade of Action must mobilise everyone, everywhere, individually and collectively, locally and globally.

As you move forward, the United Nations will accompany you every step of the way. ●
The latest in our series of annual publications, The Commonwealth Education Report 2020 will feature a series of commissioned articles from leading education experts including Heads of Government, Ministers of Education and high-level representatives within UN agencies, Commonwealth organisations, NGOs and the education sector.

It will discuss some of the Commonwealth’s most pressing education challenges, particularly in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and look at effective strategies to help Commonwealth member states achieve the ambitions of Sustainable Development Goal 4:

“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

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To explore the various opportunities available for participation, please contact our Commercial Director, Michael Malcolm
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The Sustainable Development Goals Centre for Africa: Monitoring and supporting Africa’s progress towards achievement of the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals Centre for Africa (SDGC/A) welcomes the holding of the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Conference here in Kigali, Rwanda and extends its warmest appreciation to the Head of State of the Republic of Rwanda, H.E. President Paul Kagame, and to the people of the Republic of Rwanda. The generous contribution of Rwanda has facilitated the establishment and the operations of the Centre. The SDGC/A also expresses gratitude to the members of its Board for the support and guidance.

The SDGC/A is an autonomous not-for-profit international organization that provides technical support, and expertise as input to national governments, the private sector, civil society, businesses and academic institutions to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across Africa. The SDGC/A was established in September 2015 by a resolution of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Leadership Council, which was commissioned under the auspices of the United Nations Secretary-General. The SDGC/A was formally established in July 2016 pursuant to a Host Country Agreement with the Government of Rwanda. The Center builds upon Africa’s existing successes by bringing together people, ideas and innovation to collectively reach a more sustainable future. The SDGC/A aims to develop new tools to achieve the visions of the UN’s SDGs and the AU’s Agenda 2063. Innovations in long-term planning, financing and data collection, as well as technical solutions in education, healthcare, energy and agriculture systems are some of the central pillars of the Center’s work. The SDGC/A has been relentlessly striding and working with African governments to ensure that shortcomings of past initiatives are not repeated so as to chart the future we want that leaves no one behind.

The raison d’être of The SDGC/A emanates from the generational frustrations over the years, specifically in reference to the lack of progress towards the sustainable development of the continent. The SDGs 2030 Agenda, the African Union 2063 Agenda, and the African Development Bank’s High 5s pick up from where the millennium development goals (MDGs) left the continent and all seek the same overarching goal of inclusive development. Moving forward, the Africa continent must pursue its development keeping aside any emotions. The success of the continent’s endeavours will depend on three distinct features.

First, all actions must be based on informed decisions. These should be knowledge or evidenced-based that enable clear paths to progress to be charted. Second, actions should be transformational as opposed to incremental. Africa’s impact should go beyond the continent and address challenges humanity faces on the planet. These fundamental changes require a change in our mindsets by inculcating a winner’s attitude. Third and finally, there is an urgency in addressing the challenges. The cost of inaction is extremely high and may lead to Africa falling short of its development goals in a disastrous manner.

Achieving the SDGs will require enormous resources. Governments need to be innovative in designing approaches for domestic resource mobilization and to create the fiscal space that would enable them mobilize the kind of resources needed for SDGs financing. The Commonwealth and other similar groupings have a role to play in assisting and facilitating the mobilization of these resources. Together, let’s work for a transformational change that leads to sustainable development in Africa. The need for innovation solutions is even more urgent today with the global coronavirus pandemic. The SDGC/A which has come first will only leave last in this battle.
The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our world and our world view, deepening pre-existing inequalities, and exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems. Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the negative impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex. These impacts risk reversing limited gains made on women’s rights and empowerment in the past decades.

At the same time, women have been sidelined from many decision-making structures. A 2019 UN report states that men are 75 per cent of parliamentarians, 73 per cent of managerial decision-makers, 72 per cent of executives in global health organisations, 76 per cent of the people who we see, hear or read about in our mainstream news media, and almost all (87 per cent) of the people in peace negotiations. These figures show us that we have created a world in which women are squeezed into just 25 per cent – one quarter – of the space, both in decision-making rooms and in the stories that we tell about our lives.

Today, women are heads of state and government in only 21 countries, including four in the Commonwealth (Bangladesh, New Zealand, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago), but several have been recognised as providers of global best practice in response to COVID-19, such as New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. Globally, only 21.26 per cent of ministers are women. Women mayors have been highly visible and recognised for their professionalism and compassion. In the health sector, women are increasingly being recognised for their effectiveness. For example, the Minister of Health of the Indian state Kerala was hailed as the reason that a state of 35 million people had only lost four to the virus by the middle of May 2020. Healthcare needs more women leaders. Less than 20 per cent of the world’s health ministers are women, yet overall, women make up 70 per cent of healthcare workers, operating on the frontlines to deliver essential services.

Power imbalances and false stereotypes of what women can and cannot do have gone on for far too long. They have created reinforcing feedback loops to the point where people have come to believe that girls and women really are less able to lead than men and boys – despite all the evidence to the contrary. Until recently, 53 per cent of men and 43 per cent of women globally believed that men make better political leaders than women.

The world we want has equality in power and presence. To build that better world effectively, we need women at the centre of decision-making, and critical changes in the way we run our lives, such as more equitable and sustainable sharing of the burden of care at home.

This requires strategic public investment, including equipping
frontline health workers; delivery of social protection measures that extend to informal workers, recognising women’s special circumstances and care work; gender impact analyses of fiscal stimulus and targeted financial support to businesses in feminised sectors and women-led enterprises; and high quality, accessible services to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.

In the immediate future, gender equality concerns should be embedded in the design of national policy responses to COVID-19, as well as in the national fiscal stimulus packages that countries are rolling out in response to the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis. It is vital to ensure the small allocations that went to support gender equality in the past are not further reduced and that overstretched health services do not divert resources away from the essential services women need, such as support for survivors of violence, pre- and postnatal healthcare and sexual and reproductive health.

Commonwealth countries can lead the way, by supporting women’s leadership and participation, and ensuring that women’s needs are addressed in response and recovery efforts. They can include women in emergency response groups/task teams and operation centres, and supporting women’s organisations.

Previous health crises such as the Ebola and Zika epidemics demonstrated the critical role of women’s organisations in reaching marginalised populations – including women with disabilities, women living with HIV, migrant and refugee women, and others – through risk communication and prevention efforts. Yet, although women’s organisations and community groups shoulder much of the response in local communities, too often they are left out of state or international organisation-led decision-making.

In 2018, humanitarian aid agencies consulted with women’s organisations in the planning of their response strategies in only 54 per cent of cases.

The picture is the same in previous disaster preparedness and recovery plans, where women’s needs and interests were rarely included, and tended to be developed with little or no sex- or gender-disaggregated data and little input from national gender equality representatives or women’s organisations. As a result, issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), which affects one in three women over their lifetime, receive minimal funding. In 2018, funding for GBV was only 0.3 per cent of total humanitarian funding in the countries studied.

Women are radically impatient for change. There has been a surge in women’s activism around the globe as they see that incremental change has not worked. Younger women do not want to go through the experiences of their elders and the elders are tired of waiting. Energised by young feminists at the helm, social movements are proposing new alternatives for conducting the world differently.

Commonwealth leaders can learn from the ways in which these movements work across silos. Many of them see the fight for gender equality as inseparable from broader struggles for economic, environmental and social justice. We don’t want the same world back again. It is critical now to ensure that women lead and participate fully in decision-making on COVID-19 response and recovery.

“Power imbalances and false stereotypes of what women can and cannot do have gone on for far too long.”
Policy Priorities for Sri Lanka: Creating a people-centric and knowledge-driven future

Gotabaya Rajapaksa, President, The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

The 21st century is characterised by knowledge and innovation, with technologies and networking defining human relations. It is, indeed, timely that the theme of the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2020 is ‘Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming’. This is an exciting and forward-looking roadmap to address our common challenges.

Globally, we are now facing largely non-traditional challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic, as I write this piece, is a case in point, in real time. It is an unprecedented and mammoth challenge for individual countries and the global community as a whole, due to the scale and cross-sectoral nature of the crisis. Across the world, the pandemic has compelled a fundamentally altered approach to life, work and economic activities. It casts into sharp focus, more than ever before, the need to evolve innovative thinking, collective and integrated strategies to address the entire gamut of the associated challenges.

To combat the COVID-19 outbreak, Sri Lanka adopted an aggressive model with a strenuous and continuous process. My strategy was to make proactive intervention through a whole of government approach, focusing on four Lines of Operation (LOO): military/police/intelligence, medical and healthcare, psychological and economic and community wellbeing.

Of these LOO, the first sets the basis for the entire operation, through detection, isolation and tracing of COVID-19 cases. As of 1st June 2020, Sri Lanka has recorded a 49.4 per cent recovery rate, and a death rate as low as 0.67 per cent – one of the lowest in Asia. Even with the relatively slow increase in the number of infected people, Sri Lanka has managed to contain the spread successfully within the identified clusters. The reason behind our success story is the synergy of the approach. Sri Lanka is blessed with a well-established healthcare system, with both its arms – preventive and curative systems – strong and spread throughout the island. This, as well as the synchronisation of work among all relevant stakeholders and their unparalleled dedication, has resulted in Sri Lanka being a unique and dynamic model for combating this new challenge.

The COVID-19 pandemic also gave rise to multi-dimensional impacts. We were called upon to address a drastic fall in demand for our exports, a sharp decline in tourist arrivals, disruptions to supply chains and a significant decrease in remittances. The pace of realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Sri Lanka, and in the developing countries, will also be deaccelerated. Despite this, particular mention must be made of the government’s strong intervention to look after the poor during the lockdown periods, as many such people were daily wage earners dependent on some day-to-day economic activity.

Every challenge, however unparalleled, provides an opportunity for building up individual and collective resilience, and generating new thinking and perspectives. The future I envision for Sri Lanka is a people-centric and knowledge-driven transformational beginning for all of our people.

Sri Lanka’s youth is the backbone of her future, and the focus on youth advancement is a vital linchpin of the country’s vision. During the COVID-19 induced lockdown, Sri Lanka enhanced and expanded online education for students in schools, universities and technical and vocational training institutions, through mobile phones, tablets, PCs.
and TV. The online presence of university students has reached almost 99 per cent.

Although Sri Lanka has a well-established education system which ensures free education for every child, we have not been able to provide through it the necessary skilled manpower to meet modern day challenges. We have planned to substantially increase the intake to our state universities in science- and technology-related fields of study. Skilled manpower is critically important for the fast-growing IT sector in Sri Lanka. As such, our government is making it mandatory for all students to receive computer education, to enable them to find gainful employment as they venture into the world of work.

Digitalisation of the economy, coupled with a digitally inclusive Sri Lanka, is one of our key policy priorities. Growth and development of the ICT-based services sector will be promoted to enhance foreign direct investment, job creation and income generation. To this end, the government has earmarked a target income of US$5 billion by 2022, through the transition to a ‘knowledge economy’. The digital government architecture will be reviewed and developed for delivery of services through e-governance. Sri Lanka is already the first country in South Asia to adopt international standards for digital transactions.

Sri Lanka and her people are extremely resilient and optimistic. The country has continued to recover from many past vicissitudes such as a protracted 30 year conflict, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, devastating floods and the more recent horrific Easter Sunday terror attacks. My country and my people will draw deeply from this vast reservoir of resilience to forge ahead creatively and confidently in the post-COVID-19 reality.●

“Every challenge, however unparalleled, provides an opportunity for building up individual and collective resilience, and generating new thinking and perspectives.”
Mention the country Sierra Leone and it immediately conjures the usual stereotypical images of civil war, blood diamonds and Ebola. Sierra Leone today is a very different country from this rather lazy caricature of the 1990s, just like Rwanda 26 years after genocide and Ethiopia, 29 years after civil war and famine. However, Rwanda and Ethiopia are no longer defined by their pasts.

Sierra Leone today, under the leadership of President Julius Maada Bio and his New Direction Government since April 2018, is a stable, peaceful and effectively governed country. Five successive democratic elections have successfully seen the peaceful transfer of political power from incumbent governments to opposition political parties in 2007 and 2018 – a rarity in Africa. Sierra Leone is now ranked as the third most peaceful country in sub-Saharan Africa and is emerging as the investors’ destination of choice in the West African sub-region.

The New Direction political governance and inclusive development philosophy of President Bio is predicated on the five key pillars that embrace the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) themes, to inspire the development trajectory of the country after 59 years of political independence, and to change and transform the poverty and underdevelopment narrative of Sierra Leone.

It is common knowledge that Sierra Leone’s abundant strategic mineral and natural resources have not supported the development of the country. Instead, it has become a typical example of the resource-curse debate, with the country ranked at 181 in the UN Development Programme Human Development Index of 2019.

It was determined that to change and transform Sierra Leone, the governance and development focus had to fundamentally shift from excessive dependence on natural resource extraction, to investment in Human Capital Development (HCD) as the foundation for achieving a middle-income country status, based on inclusive development and inclusive politics.

The New Direction Government deliberately privileged long term, accelerated, predictable investment in HCD as the most productive way to galvanise and sustain development change and transformation. Human beings are now considered Sierra Leone’s most important resource – not its abundant mineral resources. President Bio often tells the inspiring story of attending primary school in his village bare-footed because his mother could not afford to buy him any shoes, and how he literally walked bare-footed from his village to the State House Presidency. He has identified three key pillars for the HCD flagship programme: education, health and agriculture.

Free quality education was launched in September 2018, despite the government inheriting a near bankrupt state and with no funding for development partners. To date, it has allocated 21 per cent of its recurrent budget to the education

“Sierra Leone is now ranked as the third most peaceful country in sub-Saharan Africa.”
sector, and created two distinct but interrelated ministries of education including the Ministry of Basic and Senior Education and the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education.

The National Development Plan is entitled ‘Education for Development’, to emphasise the importance of education in the change and transformation of Sierra Leone. New investment in education has funded the building of more schools, classroom blocks and associated facilities, recruitment and training of more teachers and increased teacher salaries. It has also enabled the launch of 170 nationwide pilot projects to improve learning outcomes for basic literacy and numeracy, operationalised ten technical and vocational institutions with curricula focussed on skills training and entrepreneurship education, and approved two new universities for science and technology and technical and entrepreneurship education.

In support of the HCD health pillar, the government has increased healthcare budget allocations from seven per cent in 2018 to 11 per cent in 2020, and recruited and trained 2,500 healthcare workers with a focus on midwives, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, epidemiologists, clinical and surgical community health officers. A budget of US$19.8 million has been provided for the construction of an ultra-modern National Diagnostic and Radiotherapy Cancer Treatment Centre, and these new facilities will significantly reduce costs on overseas medical expenditure, end health tourism and broaden healthcare access to more Sierra Leoneans. Importantly, one-third of this government funding comes from the Anti-Corruption Commission, as part of the monies recovered from its corruption prosecution.

President Bio has simplified the conceptualisation of HCD as ‘feed the mind/brain’, in other words, for education: take care of the body (health security) and feed the stomach (food security). Nearly 70 per cent of the population of Sierra Leone depend on some form of agriculture for their livelihoods. With significant potential in the agricultural sector for economic diversification, growth and massive job creation, eight per cent of GDP is allocated to agricultural development transformation in a range of areas, including mechanised and commercial rice value-chain production, animal husbandry and industrial cash crop production such as cocoa, coffee and cashew nuts.

The government currently spends US$200 million on rice and US$20 million on onion importation annually, despite the vast fertile and arable lands available within the country. To end importation of the staple food, rice, and to develop sustainable food self-sufficiency to support the education and health HCD pillars, the government is funding the Ministries of Youth Affairs, Defence, the Correctional / Prisons Services and Local Councils to establish mechanised and commercial large scale institutional farms across the country.

Implementation of the HCD social and development intervention pillars is capital intensive, and so priority has been given to the efficient political and economic management of state and natural resources, to enable funds from the country’s abundant strategic mineral resources to be used to pay for HCD social service delivery and economic development.

With support from the World Bank, the first nationwide airborne geophysical survey has been completed, to provide high resolution magnetic and radiometric data on Sierra Leone’s mineral assets and deposits. This has confirmed the economic and financial potential of the country’s mineral assets and wealth, and will now be used as sovereign collateral to secure major funds to finance large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the transformative Lungi-Freetown Bridge construction project at an estimated cost of US$1.2 billion.

For 59 years, Sierra Leone has been taxiing on the tarmac of the development runway, but with the implementation of HCD under new, committed leadership, Sierra Leone is set to take-off towards middle-income country status in the coming years. If post-war Ethiopia, Rwanda and Uganda can do it, why not Sierra Leone? This is the New Direction in Africa!

“Human beings are now considered Sierra Leone’s most important resource – not its abundant mineral resources.”
Access to Justice Across the Commonwealth

The mission of the Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA) is to uphold the Rule of Law throughout the Commonwealth. In this piece, the Association’s President, Brian Speers, argues that broad access to a trusted and transparent system of justice is essential to protect marginalised and vulnerable citizens across the family of nations.

Brian H Speers,
President, Commonwealth Lawyers Association

Imperative for promoting the Rule of Law in any country is a justice process that is timeous, respected, accessible and affordable. However, can it be said that the available system of justice in the Commonwealth currently meets these requirements?

Delay between commencing proceedings and having a case determined by a court is common throughout all Commonwealth jurisdictions, but can lead to a lack of respect for the system of justice and frustration among litigants. Evidence and memory and the quality of decision-making after lengthy periods of waiting may be jeopardised.

To address delay, there must be an adequate number of appropriately trained independent judges, proper investment in court administrators and court technology, as well as court rules that take account of new technologies and restrict adjournments.

In addition, alternatives to obtaining resolution of cases in court must be promoted; most notably mediation.

In September 2017, following the destruction caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, it soon became apparent to many Caribbean jurisdictions that physical access to courts and tribunals was a Rule of Law issue. Technology assisted and many necessary hearings were conducted by virtual courts.

Likewise, in March 2020, during the UK’s COVID-19 crisis, Mr Justice Mostyn heard a welfare case to determine whether an elderly man should continue to receive life sustaining medical treatment (Re AF [2020] EWCOP 16). The hearing took place on Skype for Business and is believed to be the first ever trial conducted in England and Wales by remote means. It was considered to be a success.

Judges may soon find they have even less use for their wigs and gowns. The virtual court genie is well and truly out of the lamp.

Financially pressed governments are likely to take advantage of the recent success of virtual courts for cost savings. However, lawyers must embrace the virtual court hearing but with great caution. Remote or virtual justice will not be easily practical in those jurisdictions where jury trials have been retained. Many complex family law disputes will continue to require the judge to see the witnesses of fact give evidence in person.

Justice must, of course, be done and be seen to be done. Journalists have been able to attend remote hearings and they must be free to exercise their rights in accordance with the Commonwealth Principles on Freedom of Expression. However, journalists attending a remote hearing is not the same as providing a public right of access. It remains a cornerstone of the Rule of Law that the public can walk into a court complex and watch judges dispensing justice.

In addition, courts should be prepared, more often, to go to the people. Mobile courts and mobile witness booths are a manifestation of the Rule of Law in action and make access to justice seem real. Many Commonwealth jurisdictions are innovative in providing these mobile facilities, and the mobile court formed part of an interesting discussion at the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in November 2019.

It is important in any system of justice that those presenting cases are well trained and have a defined recognition of their duty to the court. Practitioners and their clients expect that the courts to which cases are presented, are presided over by impartial, incorruptible, trained and respected judges.

These components are essential to ensure the citizen has respect in the legal system. The judiciary must be remunerated adequately, have sufficient pension provision and must
be removed if guilty of corruption.

The executive must accept that an independent legal profession bringing challenge to powers which overreach lawful authority is vital to maintaining the Rule of Law. This was the subject of discussion at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meeting in Kampala, Uganda, in September 2019.

Lawyers must maintain the highest professional and ethical standards and be able to represent their clients without fear or favour and in an independent manner. Many give pro bono representation and in other ways to society, and their contribution economically, socially and in support of the vulnerable should be respected.

Much justice around the Commonwealth is now administered privately. Litigants who seek justice can obtain it from arbitrators, adjudicators, mediators and privately run virtual justice systems. One of the busiest justice systems in the world is the eBay Resolution Centre which resolves around 60 million commercial disputes every year.

Arbitration has a long pedigree. It aims to provide swift and private justice. Most arbitral awards cannot be effectively appealed and this finality provides great attraction to business. Arbitration, however, is not limited to commercial disputes, as the world of family law has also embraced it. This began with financial remedy settlements upon divorce, but has since moved on to ‘private’ law children disputes to determine with whom children should live, or questions in respect of their upbringing. Where there are concerns for a child’s welfare, however, that will be addressed before judges.

Mediation can deal with wider issues than those considered by the courts. Client involvement, a sense that someone has listened effectively, impressive compliance with agreements made and a sense that the parties participating have ‘had their day in court’ make mediation an important element of accessing justice. The 2018 UN Singapore Convention has underlined the importance of mediation in international commercial disputes, providing a mechanism for enforcement of agreements.

Like so many growing and vibrant life forms, with support, constant attention and the right conditions, the Rule of Law will flourish.

The author wishes to thank John McKendrick QC for his assistance with preparing this article, and who appeared for one of the parties in the Re AF case mentioned.
Parliaments and Democracy in an Evolving Commonwealth

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s Chairperson, Emilia Monjowa Lifaka, describes the important work of the organisation in supporting different parliaments and legislatures across the Commonwealth to develop fundamental democratic values and practices for the benefit of all.

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Tracing the evolution of democracy reveals the differing stages of its development in each Commonwealth country. While some countries have a history of nascent democracy, others cherish long-established democratic parliamentary governments with diverse challenges. New democratic governments face the challenge of strengthening and institutionalising democracy, and for older democracies, the question is how to deepen their roots.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) has been a forum for parliamentarians to articulate and discuss developments on parliamentary procedures and practices, democracy, good governance and human rights for over a century. These are a fundamental part of the Commonwealth’s values, as agreed by Commonwealth Heads of Government and codified in the 2012 Commonwealth Charter and other Commonwealth declarations such as the Harare Declaration of 1991 and the Singapore Declaration of 1971. The Commonwealth Charter demonstrates resolve and collective commitment to promoting and ensuring that these Commonwealth democratic principles and values are upheld, nurtured and implemented to the highest standards. The CPA continues to play an important role in this regard.

Over the years, the CPA has been a medium for sharing best practices and principles on these fundamental values, which are important for the promotion of democracy and development for the benefit of all Commonwealth citizens. It has a membership of over 180 Commonwealth parliaments and legislatures, big and small, across all regions of the Commonwealth, and holds a unique position in representing national, state, provincial and territorial legislatures in all 54 member countries.

The breadth of the CPA’s membership reminds us of the long record of cooperation and collegiality among the parliaments and legislatures of the Commonwealth. Valuable bilateral exchanges and international meetings of those elected or appointed to represent our citizens, and of officials who serve parliaments and legislative assemblies, provide important demonstrations of our shared values and democratic principles.

The CPA acknowledges that democracy is a continuously developing concept that needs to be nurtured, and that no single parliament can do it all in terms of providing a source of best practice. All parliaments, regardless of how big or small, young or old, are good sources of vital transformation and influence. The CPA is therefore a key forum for promoting parliamentary development and experience, where members learn and share from each other. The CPA’s many activities and its parliamentary journal, The Parliamentarian, are vital not only for sharing information among parliamentarians and other stakeholders, but are also instrumental in enabling the CPA to fulfil its statement of purpose to ‘connect, develop, promote and support parliamentarians and their staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth’. Members exchange views and deepen their understanding of contemporary democratic and development issues, as well as their roles and responsibilities as the peoples’ representatives.

Highlights of recent programmatic activities include assisting CPA Branches to conduct self-assessments
using our Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures under the Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy (#CP4D) project, which was funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office as a legacy of the last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2018. Since then, the project has been very well received by parliaments within the Commonwealth community, which have acknowledged the importance of the CPA Benchmarks and the benefits of undertaking self-assessments using these recommended markers. They noted that the exercise not only promotes good governance and management of parliaments, but also increases legislatures’ self-awareness of institutional gaps and challenges that need further attention.

The CPA Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures reinforce the belief that effective parliaments are one of the principal institutions of any functioning democracy. They provide a minimum standard and a guide on how a parliament should be constituted and how it should function in line with the values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter on the development of free and democratic societies.

The continuous professional development of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff remains a key priority of the CPA and we therefore continue to develop innovative and relevant programmes for our members and parliamentary staff. These programmes facilitate the expansion of knowledge, enhancement of procedures and practices, and improvements in accountability and transparency, so that our democratic institutions answer to the needs and expectations of their electorates. These activities align closely with the Commonwealth priorities for continually raising levels of performance and responsiveness.

Parliamentarians have a vital role in enabling democracy to filter down to a local level among those they represent, as they also hold to account ministers and officials at the highest levels of government. The most senior interaction between parliamentarians that takes place within the Commonwealth is at the biennial CHOGM. At successive CHOGMs, heads of government have lifted Commonwealth ambitions for its people and maintained its global relevance through the contributions of governments and parliaments alongside other intergovernmental and associated organisations, networks of civil society organisations, businesses and other partners.

Under the CHOGM 2020 theme: ‘Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming’, Commonwealth leaders will consider a wide range of issues including trade and investment; inclusive growth; creating higher levels of employment, particularly for young people; climate change and the environment, including the Commonwealth Blue Charter; providing affordable healthcare and quality education; protecting marginalised and under-represented citizens, including gender equality. There are a huge number of issues that the Commonwealth can work together on and this demonstrates the important role that Commonwealth parliaments and parliamentarians can play in driving forward progress, and in setting ambitious goals for attainment nationally, regionally and for the Commonwealth collectively.

Looking to the future, democracy in the Commonwealth must take account of changing economic situations and the impact of global pandemics, coupled with emerging trade and economic patterns deepening interdependence, peace and security issues, as well as the prospects of creating greater economic opportunities for human development and social inclusion, as these will have significant implications in defining the common aspirations of the people of the Commonwealth. It will be necessary for democracy to maintain a process of evaluating and evolving norms and practices that will allow for continuous adjustment to unfolding and ever-changing political, socio-economic and cultural trends.

“Democracy is a continuously developing concept that needs to be nurtured, and that no single parliament can do it all in terms of providing a source of best practice.”

LEFT:
Commonwealth Parliamentarians attending the 38th CPA Australia and Pacific Regional Conference in Adelaide, South Australia, November 2019.
SBL KNOWLEDGE SERVICES

THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTS FOR A GREEN PLANET

eParliament reduces the carbon footprint and saves trees

The potential of a digital transformation to revolutionize the functioning of government institutions and take the lawmaking process closer to the electorate needs no introduction. However, the parliaments of Commonwealth countries have generally lagged in adapting to digitalization and continue to depend on conventional methods that use paper-based processes and labour-intensive resources. Most countries find the concept of an eParliament interesting, but face hindrances in its implementation because of financial, infrastructural, and cultural constraints. The technological penetration into the parliaments of the Commonwealth countries has been partial and limited to forums or interactive websites. This calls for a significant effort to achieve an end-to-end digitalization of parliaments.

The Commonwealth should consider the complete digitalization of parliaments to usher in the environmental and financial benefits. The digitalization of parliaments can eliminate the use of paper and automate the parliament workflow. If implemented in each of the 54 Commonwealth countries, an eParliament could result in an estimated reduction in operational expenses by over USD 300 million in total annually. It would also save the equivalent of over 11bn sheets of A4 paper in a year. From an environmental perspective, the Commonwealth could then save more than 800,000 trees annually and reduce carbon emissions by approximately 140,000Mt over a year. The gains also extend to saving nearly 34bn gallons of water annually.

In this context, the eParliament could be considered as the ideal solution to achieve an end-to-end digitalization and to provide online access to the lawmaking process. It is a convergence of ICT and the government machinery to establish a strong democratic process that promotes both green technology and connects with the electorate at a grass-roots level.

THE UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITIONS OF THE ePARLIAMENT INCLUDE:

- Efficiency by eliminating process redundancy
- Paperless offices, with a seamless integration between departments and MPs
- Better control and monitoring of the daily operations of legislative bodies
- Improved security, with multiple encrypted levels
- More questions and notices processed through automation
- Improvement of online legislative data submissions
- Zero downtime, through providing the right information at the right time for better informed decisions
ADVANTAGES FOR THE VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS INCLUDE:

Parliament Speaker
The Speaker acquires control over the monitoring and managing of events inside the House and, furthermore, has a complete oversight on selecting and prioritizing questions to be asked. The eParliament enables seamless communications between the Speaker and the MPs and provides the Speaker with immediate access to all the relevant data.

Parliament Secretariat
The eParliament significantly reduces the efforts required by the Secretariat in preparing the daily list of business and proceedings. The Secretariat can process the submitted questions and notices much faster and facilitate amenities for MPs more smoothly. Digitalization also enables the online verification of QR code or RFID tag access passes.

The Public
The solution provides a direct channel for the public to interact with MPs. The eParliament can therefore enable a greater public participation in the lawmaking process, promoting higher levels of transparency and trust in the government machinery.

Members of Parliament
With digitalization, MPs can log in from anywhere and participate in the proceedings over the internet. They can also access privileged information online and receive real-time updates about their amenities on mobile or other web devices. The eParliament also facilitates GIS-enabled work monitoring within their constituencies.

Government Departments
With eParliament, the government departments attain higher levels of efficiency. The institutions can prepare bills, reply to questions, and further revise the replies through the digital platform. Ministers and Department Heads can share live digital notes and communicate ‘on the go’.

The Media
The system provides a centralized database of authentic data stored in a digital format. Through this, the media can access privileged information and download multilingual reports online. It is similarly easy to locate the required information by searching the online multimedia archives.

CASE STUDY: Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly
For those in doubt about the feasibility of an end-to-end digitalization of parliaments, the eParliament solution of Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly stands as testimony to the viability and success of the concept. The Honourable Prime Minister of India selected the eParliament solution (known as ‘eVidhaan’) as the preferred ‘mission mode’ under the Digital India project for implementing India’s first high-tech paperless legislative assembly.

SBL focuses on helping parliaments make the digital transition with its eParliament solution and consider it a privilege to support the Commonwealth parliaments in their steps towards digitalization.

SBL Knowledge Services Limited (SBL) is working with many Parliaments across the globe, including with Indian legislative bodies, for the digitalization of the lawmaking process. The eParliament solution focuses on the paperless functioning of the lawmaking bodies and with implementing green technologies in governance.
Towards a Digital Commonwealth

Achieving a digital Commonwealth requires an inclusive and equitable approach that will support member countries in realising the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, explains Gisa Fuatai Purcell, acting Secretary-General at the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation.

Gisa Fuatai Purcell, Acting Secretary-General, Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation

Today, the Commonwealth has over 2.4 billion people from member states with diverse economies ranging from developed advanced economies to developing and small economy countries. The Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO) is mandated by member states to provide ICT and related technical assistance and advisory services to the Commonwealth, helping governments achieve sustainable, inclusive and equitable ICT development. It is therefore imperative, that the Commonwealth strives to achieve digital equity for its citizens across the membership.

A progressive digital economy within the Commonwealth requires a digitally empowered citizenry living in a digitally enabled society. Countries in which every citizen, enterprise and organisation have digital access and the capability to participate, result in a thriving digital economy. According to the February 2020 report published by the Commonwealth Secretariat, ‘The State of the Digital Economy in the Commonwealth’, there is a considerable digital gap between the high and low income Commonwealth countries.

Most jurisdictions have adequate laws, regulations and policies in place, but for others, it is still a work in progress. Commonwealth countries such as Ghana, Kenya and South Africa are championing national strategies to stimulate dialogue and understanding to promote the digital economy. Kenya’s Digital Economy blueprint and South Africa’s Fourth Industrial Revolution strategy are just some examples of how governments can facilitate the harnessing of emerging technologies for social and economic development. Exponential growth of emerging technologies and use of big data have exacerbated the need for digital transformation in various jurisdictions, resulting in digital dividends as well as additional challenges for the Commonwealth.

Regulatory best practices will ensure the digital environment within the Commonwealth is competitive and innovative, rather than hinder advancement and development in this area.

Africa, where a number of Commonwealth member countries are based, accounts for nearly half of the global mobile money services worldwide. Fiji and Papua New Guinea are considered to be two of the key markets and emerging economies in the Pacific Island region. Fiji also has the highest mobile and Internet penetration according to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) statistics on the number of mobiles per 100 inhabitants. It is followed by Samoa and Vanuatu, and these four countries are also leading in terms of preliminary 5G readiness. Most other countries have 4G, but only in their capitals. They still rely on 3G, 2G and satellite services as their primary means of both communication and Internet access in rural areas.

There is a need for resilient, secure and available digital infrastructure across the Commonwealth and beyond. This digital infrastructure will enable the Commonwealth to increasingly engage securely on cyber-dependent trade and e-commerce platforms. Protecting individuals,
companies and governments when interacting digitally in cyberspace is vital and must be taken seriously by all Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth initiatives for developing an approach for National Cybersecurity Strategies is based on the Commonwealth Cyber Declaration, as approved at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in 2018. To support the declaration, the CTO has conducted a series of workshops and forums across the Commonwealth on Critical Information Infrastructure Protection (CIIP) and cyber standards.

Equally, data protection and privacy are critical for the digital economy to deliver its potential developmental impact. Commonwealth jurisdictions are either enhancing or implementing new data protection and privacy frameworks to address the increasingly complex issues in the digital economy landscape, as well as greater demands from citizens for privacy protection. Bermuda is a leading example, where all citizens now enjoy the right to informational privacy. It has enshrined such rights with the passing of the Personal Information Protection Act in 2019.

According to the report of the UN Secretary-General’s High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation in 2019, the areas of economic policy that require new thinking in the digital age are taxation, trade, consumer protection and competition. These are the ‘guard rails’ of the digital economy. Collaboration among Commonwealth countries will mitigate the risks and safety of the national networks leading to economic growth and a healthy digital environment.

Capacity building and digital skills development within the Commonwealth remain crucial to building future-relevant skills. Commonwealth member countries need to enhance the development of digital skills. Training should be leveraged through better coordination and collaboration across existing players and linkages with national accreditation entities.

Goal five of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 calls for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. It is imperative to promote gender equality in the Commonwealth. We need to shape the future and create opportunities for girls and women to enjoy their rights of access to education, health, mobile phones, finances and more, so they can contribute to the social and economic growth of their communities’ and their countries’ futures.

Fewer women than men have access to the Internet, and they often suffer from ‘double digital divide’ in least developed countries, being 14 per cent less likely than men to own a mobile phone. Women should be enabled and liberated to play key roles in the digital economy. Improving their welfare and access to finance should be a priority across the Commonwealth, making women agents of change, not just recipients of change. In addition, we need to engage, enable and empower those with disabilities.

Achieving a digital Commonwealth requires an inclusive approach for using digital technologies to create new or improving existing processes of doing business. Digital transformation using digital technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and other Internet-based applications will benefit countries in creating digital trading platforms and improving the delivery of public services to name a few.

It has been said that today, we are experiencing the fourth industrial revolution of the digital world. Digitising processes in both public and private sectors will help Commonwealth countries to achieve the goals of the SDGs by 2030.

“A progressive digital economy within the Commonwealth requires a digitally empowered citizenry living in a digitally enabled society.”
As the world faces highly uncertain times during the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of technology has never been so great.

Today, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are helping to keep families and communities connected, allowing millions of school children to access remote education and providing researchers with innovative tools to curb the spread of the virus and sustain the global response to the outbreak.

ICT industry players have highly appreciated the support of public authorities during the crisis, but they also count on their support and expect more favourable investment environments and more flexibility to use limited resources.

As we come to terms with this unprecedented situation, however, we must not forget all those who still lack access to ICTs. And we must not overlook the ongoing difficulties that people face around the world today.

Climate change continues to represent a global threat of epic proportion. Billions lack water, sanitation and hygiene. Gender inequality remains a reality for many women worldwide. Children are unable to access education, leaving them to continue cycles of poverty. Every day, millions of people around the world go hungry.

The urgency of responding to COVID-19 presents us with a unique opportunity to unite to speed up the development of digital society. Having a new strategy for information and communication technology at the national and global level has now become more necessary than ever – across the Commonwealth and, indeed, the whole world.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the global community’s response to these systemic challenges. The 17 goals lay out actionable and achievable targets to make the world a better place in which to live by the end of the decade.

Technology has a key role to play in achieving this future. In fact, ICTs can help accelerate the achievement of every single one of the SDGs.

Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, blockchain, cloud computing and 5G have the capacity to improve the lives of billions of people around the world. This has already been the case across the Commonwealth. For example, the Commonwealth Centre for Digital Health is exploring how new technologies can help achieve universal health coverage by 2030 – as discussed in the following piece by Professor Vajira Dissanayake.

But none of this is possible without the necessary infrastructure.

5G technologies are expected to support applications such as smart homes and buildings, smart cities, 3D video, work and play in the cloud, remote medical services, virtual and augmented reality, and massive...
machine-to-machine communications for industry automation.

Consequently, 5G has the potential to accelerate the achievement of all 17 SDGs, from affordable and clean energy to zero hunger.

Under ITU’s IMT-2020 programme, we are developing the international standards to ensure efficient interoperable 5G networks worldwide.

Equally as important is building trust and confidence in ICTs. An increase in cybercrime and security breaches around the world has led to increasing mistrust in technology today, which remains a key hurdle to achieving the SDGs.

ITU delivers Cyber Incident Response Team (CIRT) training, among many cybersecurity activities, providing member states with best practices and tools to assess and respond to different types of cybersecurity incidents.

Indeed, as evidenced by the COVID-19 crisis we are living through today, effectively addressing today’s global challenges require global solutions. And finding consensus will be key.

With some 2.4 billion people spread throughout the Commonwealth and ITU’s strong global and diverse membership, together, we represent an effective network for promoting sustainable development around the world.

Now, more than ever, the world needs the SDGs and the SDGs need ICTs.

Let us remember that ITU and the Commonwealth share common membership, common values and common objectives. Let’s continue to collaborate together to make the SDGs a reality! ✨

“5G has the potential to accelerate the achievement of all 17 SDGs, from affordable and clean energy to zero hunger.”
Since Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 through its glorious war of liberation, in all our moments of crisis, the nation has looked to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, for guidance and inspiration. The Commonwealth was the first multilateral institution that embraced Bangabandhu and Bangladesh, in April 1972, as its 34th member – much before the UN did.

Five decades later, Bangabandhu’s Commonwealth vision, uttered at the 1973 Ottawa Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), rang auspiciously true when our nation faced the double perils of COVID-19 and super-cyclone Amphan: “As Bangladesh upholds the Commonwealth values of democracy, tolerance, inclusiveness and equality, we will look to a world where humanity is capable of great successes in the era of astounding advances in science and technology … where every person will have the minimum guarantee of a happy and respectable life.

This powerful philosophy, rooted at the heart of my government’s Digital Bangladesh Vision 2021, has been a game-changer for our nation since 2009. It has been connecting,
empowering and transforming our 165 million people, much like the Commonwealth’s key aspirations for its next CHOGM, originally planned to take place in Kigali in June 2020.

Our digital mantra has not only been the blueprint for an inclusive innovation ecosystem for unlocking the digital creativity of our 100 million youths, it also succeeded in fast-tracking Bangladesh’s pre-COVID GDP growth rate to 8.13 per cent, making us the seventh fastest growing economy in the world, and fully on track to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

And now, in 2020, when so many of us in the Commonwealth are fighting battles with COVID-19 – when all of us are frantically searching for an effective vaccine – as well as extreme climate-induced disasters and economic shocks, I call upon all to respond to these challenges by transforming our governance, society and ecosystems to a digitally enabled, agile and innovative enterprise, to deal with the post-pandemic ‘new normal’.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Bangladesh responded with its crisis-time public service delivery, reaping the benefits of having invested in a robust Digital Bangladesh infrastructure. This included the launch of The Bangabandhu-1 dedicated satellite, helping to make the internet accessible to over 157 million mobile phones and 91 million internet users at one of the lowest prices globally.

When the category five super-cyclone Amphan hit our coasts at 250km/hour in May 2020 amidst the COVID-19 crisis, we evacuated more than 2.5 million people from our coasts to over 14,000 cyclone shelters observing social distancing, within 72 hours. All this was achieved thanks to a fully IT-enabled weather forecasting and early warning system, and mobile apps which mobilised 70,000 cyclone preparedness volunteers and first responders.

The US$11.5 billion COVID-19 financial incentive and safety net package that my government declared for millions of our post-pandemic ‘new poor’ was directed to five million households comprising daily wage earners and vulnerable groups, through the government’s digital social safety net payment gateways. Four and a half million laid-off garment workers were paid wages from public funds using mobile banking and digital wallets.

To expand digital financial inclusion during social distancing, our public sector banks have introduced a ‘two-minute’ online bank account, which can be opened from home through the government’s a2i mobile app. Digital Bangladesh also incentivised our nation’s innovation dividends.

In our response to the pandemic, we also innovated and repurposed many digital public services for our health sector service delivery, for example the national 333 helpline was repurposed to provide logistical support for vital services including health, self-testing, relief and food distribution.

With the various data for self-testing and contact tracing available from apps, health and test centres, national helplines and various other sources, we have formed a National Data Analytics taskforce to analyse the numbers and support the government in its critical decision-making during the crisis. In a matter of days, 40,000 doctors, medical students, nurses and health workers were trained using the internationally award-winning e-Learning programme Muktopaath (open learning) to provide telemedical advice to high-risk COVID-19 patients. The ‘Doctor’s Pool’ app, an ‘Uber-like’ system for on-call doctors and 30 telemedicine companies to respond to 333 helpline calls, was also created.

Over 50 logistics and e-commerce companies are ensuring supply chains for food, medicines and other necessaries across the country using our government’s Food for Nation app, an online agricultural platform, and EkShop app, an e-commerce platform. These have enabled farmers to directly connect with urban buyers during lockdowns. Bangladesh is now producing vital items of PPE that we were unable to import, including gowns and face shields, using open source designs. Our private sector is manufacturing lifesaving ventilators under the government’s digital patronage.

We have advanced our public service delivery during social distancing by championing a whole-of-society digitisation and innovation transformation. The Commonwealth, with a third of the world’s most diverse populations, needs also to digitise and innovate, unite and collaborate more than ever before, to secure a more resilient, safer, equitable and prosperous future in the post-pandemic ‘new normal’.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Bangladesh responded with its crisis-time public service delivery, reaping the benefits of having invested in a robust Digital Bangladesh infrastructure.
Leveraging Mobile Technology in Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

Mats Granryd, Director General of the GSMA, outlines how governments and other stakeholders can work together to ensure that digital technologies are effectively employed to provide the critical connectivity that is sustaining modern life during the COVID-19 crisis.

Ensuring network stability
Networks are inevitably feeling the strain as a result of the surge in activities now conducted online. Operators are investing in added capacity to ensure their networks remain as robust and secure as ever. In some markets such as Ghana, Jordan, South Africa, Tunisia and the USA – to name a few – regulators and operators have come together to make additional spectrum available to face this unprecedented situation.

Disseminating vital information
The ability to keep citizens up to date with the latest advice is vital in fast-developing situations. Operators are working with governments to deliver timely information directly to mobile devices. Examples include: information messaging services, video conferencing, connectivity for new hospitals, services for emergency responders and providing entertainment and education to those in isolation.

Connecting vital services
In a global health emergency, connecting health centres and hospitals is an absolute priority, enabling services such as remote diagnostics and telemedicine.

Helping with financial hardship
Many operators are voluntarily offering solutions to those suddenly facing financial problems. These include flexible payment options, the lifting or extending of data caps to enable increased usage, free public wi-fi, and more.

Supporting working from home
As well as a secure connection, many workers need additional tools and support to work from home. Operators are providing productivity tools, for example, free conference calling software and training plans, to assist home working. And many are providing additional content and services for stay at home children too.

Leveraging the power of mobile big data
The use of mobile big data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) has a key role to play in monitoring and containing disease outbreaks. In the case of disease, mobility is one of the critical factors that contribute to the spread of human-transmitted infectious viruses. In many countries, operators are working with national health authorities to use aggregated and anonymised movement data to help predict the spread of the coronavirus.

Governments and regulatory authorities also have a crucial role to play in supporting the communications sector in ensuring and extending connectivity at this critical time. The GSMA encourages Commonwealth countries’
governments and regulators to consider a range of measures that could help the mobile sector continue to provide vital connectivity during the COVID-19 crisis.

For example, several measures can be quickly implemented to help operators manage traffic demands and ensure citizens’ access to services is maintained, including allowing temporary regulatory flexibility for operators to manage traffic and quality-of-service parameters, which will help them to ensure the resilience of their networks. Regulators can authorise operators to deploy compatible mobile technology across the spectrum bands they hold and grant cost-free temporary access to additional emergency spectrum, as necessary.

Acceleration of planning permission for installation of network infrastructure will also enable rapid introduction of additional capacity on existing network sites, and allowing operators to voluntarily share infrastructure will help them to meet the exceptional demands on their networks.

Finally, governments that categorise mobile network equipment as essential infrastructure are helping by streamlining customs and logistical processes which can speed up procurement and delivery of network equipment to operators.

Other measures can be considered to help mobile operators comply with social distance advice while continuing to provide vital network operations. These include categorising telecommunications personnel as key workers, so they are exempt from strict social distancing measures. Operators can also benefit from temporary flexibility to meet consumer obligations, by minimising face-to-face contact and offering alternative digital channels. Regulators may also want to consider adjusting timelines of regulatory reviews and reporting so that operators can prioritise efforts on business-critical matters related to the crisis.

Governments have a vital role to play in supporting the financial sustainability of mobile operators and their customers. While the mobile industry is aware of its responsibility to provide connectivity to all subscribers – and vulnerable consumers in particular – it needs to work with governments and customers to find pragmatic, sustainable and responsible approaches to meeting essential connectivity needs during this crisis.

The GSMA recommends that governments convene a dialogue with mobile operators about supporting customers that find it difficult to top-up their prepaid phone or pay their bill as a result of COVID-19. Governments can also support operator initiatives for vulnerable consumers by easing regulatory barriers and permitting commercial flexibility to offer special tariffs and zero-rated access to particular services. Mobile money solutions can be leveraged to disburse humanitarian assistance faster and more efficiently. Reductions or waivers of sector-specific taxes, excise duties and fees on mobile communications, data, mobile money transactions and international gateways, will also help to encourage digital communications and transactions in support of social distancing and social cohesion objectives.

The COVID-19 crisis has put the spotlight on digital connectivity as an absolute necessity of modern life and a tool that can be depended upon as governments work to protect citizens and save lives. Governments have a vital role to play in supporting the financial sustainability of mobile operators and their customers. While the mobile industry is aware of its responsibility to provide connectivity to all subscribers – and vulnerable consumers in particular – it needs to work with governments and customers to find pragmatic, sustainable and responsible approaches to meeting essential connectivity needs during this crisis.

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The COVID-19 crisis has put the spotlight on digital connectivity as an absolute necessity of modern life and a tool that can be depended upon as governments work to protect citizens and save lives. In this public health crisis, we are all learning to adapt to new circumstances and support efforts to contain the spread of the disease. All stakeholders must continue to work together to ensure that digital technologies continue to provide the vital connectivity that is sustaining communities now, and will undoubtedly help to pave the way towards longer term recovery.
Building Resilient Education Systems with Distance and Online Learning

Asha Kanwar, the President and CEO at Commonwealth of Learning, advises governments to build education systems that not only respond to disaster but are resilient to it, through integrating distance and online learning and innovations focused on the most vulnerable and marginalised learners.

Over 574 million students in the Commonwealth are out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. No one was prepared for the unprecedented learning crisis, nor the immediate response that would be required. Distance and online learning have become the only means for many educational institutions to keep the doors of learning open. For some, this is an entirely new experience and uncharted territory. And, there is the added challenge of connectivity – only half the world’s population has access to the internet, and the situation is much worse in developing countries.

What kind of support do countries require as they shift to distance and online education? First, there is a need for quality content, especially at the school level, which has the greatest number of displaced learners. Countries require support to map existing Open Educational Resources (OER) or free content, to their curriculum. Second, there is an urgent need for teacher training in distance and online education to ensure a smooth transition. Third, member states require support to leverage a range of technologies for distance learning, including print, radio, TV and online, so that even the most remote communities can access learning. Fourth, with the move to distance and online education, there is a need for alternative assessment and examination systems. Lastly, countries require enhancements to their digital infrastructure to provide an enabling ecosystem for effective distance and online provision.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust distance learning into the spotlight, open and distance learning (ODL) has been flourishing for 50 years in both developed and developing countries, and it has proven to be an effective response in crisis situations. In 2011, when teachers in Botswana went on strike and schools were closed, the established open schooling network responded immediately by sharing resources so that students could continue to learn at home. When Ebola struck Sierra Leone, the Commonwealth of Learning’s (COL) OER for Open Schools was shared widely, ensuring that learning could carry on. Similarly, when Cyclone Gita devastated the small island state of Tonga, COL’s Aptus device, loaded with secondary school content, provided a ‘classroom without walls’ so learners could access digital materials without electricity or internet.

Distance education has also been leveraged to address inequities, which can be exacerbated during crises. It is often girls who are the most at risk of dropping out of education when crisis strikes. Initiatives such as CommonwealthWiseWomen, an online mentorship programme for underprivileged girls, help to develop leadership skills and encourage girls to aspire to a better future, even in the face of adversity.

Another constituency in danger of being further marginalised during crisis is people with disabilities (PWD). Even in normal circumstances, the participation of PWD in higher education has been low, especially in developing countries such as India and South Africa. Preety Daby in Mauritius could not pass her class nine exam because of the lack of a braille textbook. Now that she has been provided with learning resources and assistive devices she is excelling and plans to go to university. Simple but innovative
solutions have also been used to bring education to remote communities, both in times of crisis and stability. In pre-COVID-19 days, children in remote and flood-prone regions in Bangladesh studied in boat schools. As this is no longer possible today, they have responded by using the boats to bring teachers into communities, to lead small classes while practising safe physical distancing.

While these examples show how distance education has been leveraged as a response to disaster, we must move from response to resilience. From the current crisis, we have seen that countries with strong and robust existing distance education systems have been able to maintain continuity much more successfully than those without them already in place. India, with its thriving system of open universities, a National Institute of Open Schooling with sites throughout the country, a robust, national online learning platform, and a wide range of radio and TV content, is an example of a resilient ecosystem ready to deal with current and future crises. In Namibia, the Namibian College of Open Learning, with centres across the nation, has more than 40,000 learners enrolled in its programmes and while campus-based schools closed, their distance learning operations continued uninterrupted. By having strong systems in place before disaster strikes, these countries have maintained the continuity of learning during the crisis.

However, these systems have required thoughtful and systematic planning. Many of the concerns about quality and access during the current pandemic are largely due to the fact that countries have not had the time to plan the rollout of distance education. Pandemics, climate change and social/political unrest are realities that we will continue to face in the future. How can governments begin to build education systems that not only respond to disaster but are resilient to it?

Governments have an important role to play in the sustainable and systematic integration of distance education into national systems. Countries must develop appropriate national ODL and OER policies/frameworks, as well as national ICT and connectivity strategies to overcome access barriers. Inclusive policies, focusing on PWD, should be implemented to ensure no one is left behind.

Governments must boost investments in technology infrastructure at educational institutions, and develop or promote national online learning platforms that cater to large numbers of learners, and support a range of affordable and appropriate technologies. They must also invest in financial support schemes for students (especially women/girls and low income students) to access technologies for personal use, and encourage cooperation between institutions to avoid duplication of efforts.

The current short term challenge of COVID-19 has provided us with an opportunity to rethink our approach to education. It is time to build resilient education ecosystems that can both survive and be prepared for future crises. We need to look beyond the current crisis and integrate distance and online learning into all educational systems, build the capacity of our teaching and focus on innovations for the most vulnerable and marginalised people.

“Pandemics, climate change and social/political unrest are realities that we will continue to face in the future. How can governments begin to build education systems that not only respond to disaster but are resilient to it?”
The Spanish flu of 1918-19 was an unusually deadly pandemic caused by an influenza virus that resulted in the loss of millions of lives across the globe. A century later, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV2 virus. The technology at hand today to fight this pandemic is far superior to what was available then, but we continue to see morbidity and mortality of an unprecedented scale around the world.

The speed at which health systems have had to respond to this pandemic has exposed their vulnerabilities and highlighted the need for us to work towards strengthening them in a concerted manner.

The Commonwealth Centre for Digital Health (CWCDH) has been at the forefront of the Commonwealth’s digital response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The work of the CWCDH is based on the Systems Framework for Healthy Policy, adopted by Commonwealth Health Ministers at their meeting in Geneva, in May 2016. The framework was developed on the One Health multisector systems approach, building on the Global Charter for the Public’s Health. It was aimed at advancing global health security and sustainable wellbeing for all.

The framework identified the key systems enablers: governance, knowledge, advocacy and capacity; and the core services aimed at protection, promotion, prevention and people-centred care; that must be strengthened to make robust health systems capable of responding to the healthcare needs of its populations in any situation.

This framework was the ideal platform through which the CWCDH could evaluate pre-existing, as well as newly developed, digital health solutions with the view to making recommendations on how they could be deployed to strengthen health systems. The result of the evaluation was the Digital Health Solutions for COVID-19 Platform, which was launched at the Commonwealth Health Ministers’ virtual meeting in May 2020.

In evaluating the existing solutions, we recognised that there was an urgent need for a digital solution that could be deployed to enable large numbers of people in self isolation and quarantine to monitor their own health status.
well as for health systems to manage and track such people. That resulted in the CWCDH innovation team developing the COVID Shield app (it has since been rebranded as Self Shield to comply with App Store and Google Play regulations), which was launched via a global webinar in April 2020. The health system of any country can adopt it and the CWCDH is happy to provide technical support.

The corporate sector has been looking at Self Shield as a tool to maintain health and safety in workplaces as countries come out of lockdown, and the CWCDH is working with the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council to introduce it. It has now been deployed in several South Asian countries and will soon be used in Africa.

Self Shield has been developed as a global public good. Individuals who want to use the app can download and use it freely for their personal use or opt to enrol in monitoring programmes by health ministries or workplaces that are using it to check on the health status of their citizens or employees.

Against this background, the Commonwealth Health Professions Alliance conducted a Virtual Civil Society Policy Forum on 6 May 2020, with participants from 56 countries - both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth. The forum brought together doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists and social care workers, as well as other advocacy groups such as those working in HIV and AIDS and care of the elderly. They identified the potential benefits, opportunities, challenges and risks of the use of digital technologies in healthcare and made a series of recommendations to the Commonwealth Health Ministers and the Commonwealth Secretariat that were tabled at the Health Ministers’ virtual meeting on 10 May 2020. These recommendations are:

• Commonwealth Health Ministers request the Commonwealth Secretariat, working with partners such as the CWCDH, to conduct a study across all Commonwealth countries, to map the use of digital technologies in health service and medicines delivery; identifying digital technology resources already available and being used; document best practices; as well as identifying digital technology challenges and needs, and publish the outcome of the study online through the COVID-19 Digital Solutions Platform under development by the CWCDH.

• Commonwealth Health Ministers mandate the Commonwealth Secretariat to work with individual Commonwealth Countries, at their request, to provide technical advice in the integration, acquisition and use of digital technologies into their health service delivery and the continuing professional development of their health workforce, specifically looking at innovative ways of using technology to support expanded roles for the existing health workforce in the current environment of health workforce shortages.

• Commonwealth Health Ministers, through the Commonwealth Secretariat, explore the opportunities for cross-Commonwealth collaboration in the use of digital technology in healthcare with a view to establishing a Commonwealth social and business coalition in digital technology, leveraging best practices, and including, as appropriate, public, social business and private entities.

• Commonwealth Health Ministers, through the Commonwealth Secretariat and their Human Rights Unit, and in collaboration with Commonwealth Associations, take the lead in calling for the development of model regulation, policy and standards for the use of digital technology in health service delivery, including addressing privacy, security, equity, and respect for human rights concerns, in order to remove red tape, empower and connect the health workforce, support equitable access to quality healthcare and medicines, and disseminate information.

• The Commonwealth Secretariat, in implementing these recommendations, and recognising the close links between effective delivery of health services and related social services, explore ways to ensure integration and inter-connectedness in digital technologies across sectors.

We look forward to working with the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth governments to take these recommendations forward.

LEFT: The Digital Health Solutions for COVID-19 Platform was launched at the Commonwealth Health Ministers’ virtual meeting in May 2020.
CRDB Bank plc is one of East Africa’s leading banks, serving individuals, SMEs and large corporations with a full range of retail, treasury, insurance, trade finance, syndication, agriculture, micro-finance and premier banking services. CRDB has a strong presence in Tanzania and Burundi, with plans underway to extend its footprint into other East and Central African countries.

Over the years, through the strategic deployment of innovative products and services, CRDB Bank has redefined customer experience standards and created diverse service delivery channels to further its value creation objectives to its range of customers. The Bank is well-renowned as a leader in innovation in Tanzania and has continuously worked towards entrenching excellence in service delivery, and in building an efficient machine for sustainable growth.

Shaping the future through innovation

Getting innovation off the ground

CRDB Bank took its first huge step towards digital transformation in 2002 when Tanzania’s first ever smartcard was launched. A few years later, the Bank introduced a 24/7 mobile banking solution branded ‘SimBanking’, which paved the way for both self-service and convenience banking facilities. This revolutionized each customer’s personal banking experience and reduced their over-dependence on visiting brick and mortar branches for their banking services.

In 2015, recognizing the ever-growing proliferation of smartphones, CRDB Bank launched the ‘SimBanking’ app. The service continues to empower customers to pay their bills, transfer funds and know their account balances without having to travel to their branch. Over 3 million customers have signed up to SimBanking since its inception.

CRDB Bank’s ‘e-Commerce System’ similarly provides convenience in terms of revenue collection through an integrated online user-friendly payment solution and through point of sale payments. Integrated into more than 1,000 institutions across the country, including in hospitals, CRDB Bank is recognized for vastly increasing efficiency in revenue collection. In 2019, Zanzibar recorded a 3,000% increase in annual collection fees, growing from $400,000 in 2014 to $8 million last year.
According to the Bank’s Group CEO, Abdulmajid Nsekela, CRDB Bank plan to push more transactions outside the banking hall through its digital platforms and use the traditional branches instead to process larger transactions, collect customer feedback and build relationships.

**Financial inclusion**

Whilst CRDB Bank has been undertaking the strategic physical expansion of its branches across Tanzania and Burundi, its investment in digital technology has also advanced the government’s financial inclusion agenda and the economic empowerment of the majority of the unbanked.

In 2013, CRDB Bank became the first bank in Tanzania to introduce agency banking services targeting the unbanked population. The introduction of "FahariHuduma Wakala", now known as "CRDB Wakala", was a game-changer and has transformed the set-up of delivery channels for many banks. Banks are now not reliant on traditional brick and mortar branches to enlarge their footfall and take services closer to people.

The innovation in agency banking has shaped not only how banks deliver services to customers and contribute to the financial inclusion agenda, but also on how banks contribute to furnishing employment opportunities. So far, CRDB Bank has over 15,000 CRDB Wakala across the country serving more than 3 million customers.

**Banking innovation for development**

At CRDB Bank innovation is not limited to technologies. The Bank has always been on the forefront of supporting strategic development projects in Tanzania and the realization of ‘Vision 2025’ for building a semi-industrialized economy.

In 2018, the Bank partnered with United Bank for Africa (Tanzania) in an historic financial syndication to provide $737.5 million in guarantees for the execution of the $2.95 billion Julius Nyerere Hydropower Station, which is set to produce 2100 megawatts of power. The Bank also contributed $124 million for the construction of the Tanzania Standard Gauge Railway, linking the country to the neighbouring countries of Rwanda and Uganda.

CRDB Bank’s vision to transform the economies in which it operates is also reflected in its commitment to support Public-Private Partnership programmes across a wide range of sectors, covering trade, transport and communication infrastructure, social infrastructure, mining, energy and agriculture.

CRDB Bank has also recently introduced a number of innovative bridge financing products to enable both public and private sector institutions to implement various projects, including SME projects. This will not only increase employment, but also reduce poverty and accelerate economic growth.

**Digital lending**

With the digital service delivery channels in place, CRDB Bank’s digital transformation journey has seen the Bank digitizing some of its lending products to offer quick, easy and cheaper loans to customers. The Bank’s digital lending products include Salary Advance, Pension Advance, the Jiwezeshe Loan for Micro-Entrepreneurs and Boom Advance for higher education students.

**Safe banking**

In 2019, more than 85% of Bank’s transactions were performed through alternative channels. So, when the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic hit, the Bank was already in good shape, in terms of serving customers using digital banking alternatives and so helping customers to avoid mass gatherings. In these challenging times, it has been truly inspirational to see how services such as SimBanking, SimAccount, Internet Banking and Agency Banking ‘CRDB Wakala’ have risen superbly and served customers at their convenience.

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Trade and COVID-19: Delivering a common future

Roberto Azevêdo, Director-General of the World Trade Organization, believes that an open and connected multilateral trading system is essential to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and emphasises trade’s critical role in helping countries rebound from the economic crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already had a major impact on people’s lives, on health systems and on economic prospects. Both in public health and in the economy, cooperation and solidarity at all levels will be critical for countries to recover.

“Keeping markets open, connected and predictable will be essential to stimulate the investments needed for economic growth, development and job creation.”

The Commonwealth’s 54 member states, of all sizes and levels of development, know this well. Cooperation is at the heart of the Commonwealth’s strategy to advance economic growth, development and the wellbeing of all its members. The alliance can be a powerful voice for solidarity in the international arena – including on trade – as we chart a course for recovery.

The COVID-19 pandemic remains first and foremost a public health crisis. But its economic and social impacts have already been enormous. To curb the spread of the virus, large sections of the world economy were effectively shut down. Millions of people have already lost their jobs; the International Labour Organization estimates that the livelihoods of 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy – nearly half the global workforce – are in danger.

Globally, trade has also been severely affected by supply and demand shocks. Multi-country value chains have been disrupted by emergency factory and border closures. Prices for most commodities have plummeted. Remittances from overseas workers are declining. Travel has nearly ground to a halt – dealing a particularly hard blow to economies where tourism is an important economic activity, such as in many Commonwealth small island developing states.

According to World Trade Organization (WTO) forecasting, trade will fall steeply in all regions and sectors in 2020. Even in an optimistic scenario, our economists see world merchandise trade volumes tumbling by 13 per cent in 2020 – more than at the most acute phase of the Great Recession in 2008-09. If the pandemic is not brought under control, and governments fail to coordinate their economic policy responses, the decline could be 32 per cent, which is on par with the fall in global trade seen during the first three years of the Great Depression of 1929-32.

However, the forecast contained one hopeful message: a vigorous rebound is possible. Two factors will determine the strength of the recovery. First, the duration of the pandemic. Second, the economic policy choices that governments make – the monetary and fiscal stimulus they implement at home to help households and businesses, and the degree to which they coordinate policies at the international level to increase the collective impact of these measures. Decisions taken now will shape the prospects for recovery and growth. Therefore, it is essential to lay down the foundations that will allow for a strong, sustainable and inclusive recovery, and maintaining open markets for global trade flows will be an important part of this.

In the short term, fighting the pandemic is our top priority. And here, trade has a role to play. Leveraging the power of global value chains could help ramp up production for
personal protective equipment and other critical equipment such as test kits, ventilators and – soon, we must hope – new treatments and vaccines. For the many countries that depend on imports of medical supplies, keeping trade channels open will be vital for continued access. To facilitate transparency, the WTO is monitoring the measures that governments have introduced, both to lower tariff and non-tariff barriers to COVID-related medical products, and to restrict trade, notably exports.

Looking ahead, keeping markets open, connected and predictable will be essential to stimulate the investments needed for economic growth, development and job creation. Open trade policies allow countries to tap into each other’s growth, and to reap the productivity gains that come with specialisation and scale. They are fundamental for the supply of essential goods at affordable prices. If governments turn inward and attempt to pursue self-sufficiency across large sections of the economy, it will subject families and businesses to new supply and price shocks on top of those already inflicted by the pandemic.

It is heartening, therefore, that leaders at the G20, from the private sector and civil society, have emphasised the importance of cooperative trade arrangements, including through the WTO.

Coordination and dialogue are embedded in the DNA of the WTO. The Commonwealth, with its emphasis on promoting trade and investment among its members, shares this vision. Efforts like the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda are a valuable complement to multilateral cooperation, to ensure that everybody can benefit from trade.

The COVID-19 pandemic is clearly a defining and challenging moment for us all. However, it is also an opportunity to strengthen global cooperation and solidarity across the board. Commonwealth countries can be a powerful voice for international solidarity, both to tackle this pandemic, and to rebuild a stronger, more resilient and more cooperative global economy. This includes the ongoing process of improving the ways in which the WTO works, to make it more responsive to members’ needs.

The precise course of ongoing negotiations, as well as the wider debate over WTO reform, will need to be determined by members in light of the evolving public health and economic situation. But a strong and effective rules-based multilateral trading system will help all countries emerge from the current downturn.

I look forward to continuing working together with the Commonwealth to support an effective response and a strong and inclusive global recovery, where nobody is left behind.
Gender Responsive Trade:
Realising the Commonwealth commitment

The COVID-19 pandemic must not allow the important global drive towards gender-responsive trade to be lost, argues Girish Menon, Chief Executive of ActionAid UK. Instead, it should provide a critical moment for leaders to rethink their approaches, and ensure trade does not pursue commercial interests at the expense of women's economic rights.

At the last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2018 in London, leaders pledged to take a ‘gender-responsive approach’ to trade. This is a welcome and important commitment. Women’s rights organisations in the Global South and feminist economists have long called for the gendered impacts of trade to be recognised and addressed, a call echoed by their allies in civil society, including ActionAid.

The promise reflects a growing appreciation of the fact that free trade can have negative impacts for women. Women’s rights organisations in the Global South and feminist economists have long called for the gendered impacts of trade to be recognised and addressed, a call echoed by their allies in civil society, including ActionAid.

COVID-19 pandemic:
A critical moment for change

The COVID-19 pandemic – which hastragically swept through communities around the world – is a critical moment for leaders to rethink their approach. The crisis highlights how current trade policy can risk deepening gender inequality, as COVID-19-related lockdowns across the consuming Global North have led to investors withdrawing and companies cancelling orders, with suppliers in the Global South ultimately forced to shut their doors.

Lacking any form of social protection, this means that women workers can be left destitute overnight. Take the example of garment workers in countries across South and South East Asia, and in a growing number of African countries. The expansion of global value chains, facilitated through trade and investment deals, has generated millions of much-needed jobs for women, who comprise some 80-90 per cent of the workforce producing clothes for major brands. However, the precarious and exploitative nature of these jobs is widely known, fuelled by the downward pressure on labour standards and wages as countries compete to attract investors.

As of 7th April 2020, more than a million garment workers in Bangladesh alone have been sent home without pay after major clothing brands cancelled or suspended US$3.05 billion of orders due to the collapse in consumer demand caused by COVID-19. And, with the media indicating that UK retailers will need to re-open with reduced prices, we can expect – as witnessed during the 2008 financial crisis – a further decline in wages and working conditions in supply chains. A truly gender-responsive approach to trade is fundamental for...
protecting women’s right to decent work, particularly during periods of financial uncertainty.

**Protecting public services**

In understanding what a truly gender-responsive approach means, governments must consider how trade can affect women with respect to their multiple roles in society, whether as workers, small-scale farmers, consumers, and – vitally – as the main givers of unpaid care and domestic work for households and communities. Women undertake over 76 per cent of all the world’s unpaid care work – with the burden greatest in contexts of poverty, where public services are lacking or inadequate.

Indeed, this pandemic has shone a renewed light on the vital role public services play, such as health and social care. Here in the UK, I am among millions of citizens who, weekly, step out onto their front doorsteps to loudly applaud our National Health Service. But just as governments from the Global North are rightly taking steps to bolster their own public health systems in response to COVID-19 – such as the EU-wide effort to secure additional ventilators – they should seek to be a force for good in the world by ensuring that trade deals forged with developing and emerging economies do not limit the capacity of governments to decide how they provide public services.

Trade deals can lock-in privatisation of vital services such as water and healthcare, making it almost impossible for countries to reverse it in future, even if there is a public need or democratic demand to do so. The Regional and Comprehensive Economic Partnership currently being negotiated by 15 countries contains such a provision.

Privatisation can see the quality of jobs deteriorate, as well as the introduction of user fees that are unaffordable to the poorest communities, with women – who comprise 70 per cent of healthcare workers globally, and who do the majority of caring within their communities – experiencing the heaviest impacts.

**A truly gender-responsive approach**

So how can governments move beyond a focus on women’s entrepreneurship? Firstly, a gender-responsive approach requires transparent policy processes, with proper parliamentary scrutiny. This means undertaking gendered human rights impact assessments of trade deals, with time and space built into the process to ensure the deal can be amended. Women’s rights organisations, particularly those representing the most marginalised groups, should be meaningfully consulted to understand how trade may affect different groups of women.

We hope that, as it enters new global trading arrangements, the UK will set a positive example internationally in raising standards of transparency, scrutiny and participation.

Steps must be taken to ensure women in global supply chains can enjoy their right to decent work, with measures to end the race-to-the-bottom of wages and working conditions. Multinationals must be held accountable for rights violations in their supply chains, including through mandatory gender-responsive human rights due diligence legislation and a binding UN treaty on business and human rights. The potential impacts on public services should be addressed, with the most critical services excluded completely.

Finally, in a COVID-19 context where many countries are rightly putting the welfare of their citizens before commercial gains, I hope that lessons will be learned for the future. International trade should be harnessed as an opportunity to fulfil the needs and rights of women and communities everywhere. The Commonwealth community has an important role to play in this urgent and challenging task.

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**BELOW:**

A female textile worker in Dhaka, Bangladesh, holds up a sign to highlight women’s rights to decent work.

“International trade should be harnessed as an opportunity to fulfil the needs and rights of women and communities everywhere.”
Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economy was already ailing from trade tensions and uncertainties in 2019. Shocks in supply and demand, driven by public health measures to protect people from the spread of COVID-19, put the economy at a standstill. Global trade and investment are anticipated to drop significantly and substantial declines are also expected in exports, imports and foreign direct investment (FDI). Service sectors like tourism, travel and hospitality are bearing losses, while others have moved online. What is unprecedented and unknown is the scale and intensity of these setbacks, including in Commonwealth countries.

Halted economies in Asia and the Pacific are key players in global and regional value chains. They include the small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) that account for the majority in the region, and which have been particularly impacted. The informal labourers in SMEs have experienced abrupt losses in income and livelihoods. Moreover, they are often the poorest in society who live and work in unsafe conditions, compounding the risk of contracting diseases.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to change the future of trade. Bankruptcies and risk aversion towards global value chains will force producers and consumers to find new suppliers, with some chains altered entirely. Such shifts may lead to protectionist policies that bear unnecessary economic losses.

There is no doubt about the role that open global trade and investment have played in supporting growth and poverty reduction, including in most Commonwealth countries. In 1971, the Commonwealth outlined in the Singapore Declaration that free trade will support the fight against poverty, ignorance and disease. A few decades later, it was identified as a means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable trade and investment must be actively promoted on a multilateral level.

The post-COVID-19 environment will be a new normal in the economic sphere. Many areas of life and work will not be business as usual. Yet, in times of challenge there are also opportunities.

“The post-COVID-19 environment will be a new normal in the economic sphere. Many areas of life and work will not be business as usual. Yet, in times of challenge there are also opportunities.”
publicly committed to keeping supply chains open. For example, food and other essential items started arriving in Singapore from New Zealand in April 2020 under a new trade declaration. Both nations have pledged to ensure the continued production and flow of essential items for the combating of the COVID-19 pandemic through their sea and air ports.

New technologies will smooth the transition period while we have the chance to adopt more sustainable practices. The Commonwealth is home to both the most technologically advanced nations and those that depend on technology transfer. This opens a window of opportunity for all. As current and new technologies will be widely deployed, we have the chance to create new markets, allocate our resources more efficiently and overcome the current crisis faster. For example, trade digitalisation makes transactions more transparent and efficient. Paperless cross-border trade systems also make trade more inclusive. This allows more people to engage in trade, including SMEs.

Digitalisation of services and goods has enhanced our resilience to the pandemic. A portion of the economy was saved due to remote work possibilities. The silver lining of this crisis might be an accelerated shift towards the digital economy and ‘dematerialisation’. To boost this transition, the technology gap must be narrowed through sustained investment in and transfer of technology, especially information and communications technology (ICT). Similarly, digital infrastructure must be expanded. This includes broadening both telecommunication and electricity infrastructure.

The crisis has emphasised that every investment made must have an impact beyond financial return. We must prioritise investments that enhance the wellbeing of our communities and drive sustainable development. Once the pandemic is over and as we strive for economic recovery, we must not forget about people- and environment-centric governance to achieve these goals. Only through channelling trade and technology to promote equal and inclusive societies can we make sustainable development a reality.
The African Continental Free Trade Area: Preparing for trading

African Union Commissioner for Trade and Industry, Ambassador Albert M. Muchanga, summarises the tremendous efforts being made to transform the economic and commercial landscape of Africa through the creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, and outlines the key steps that lie ahead.

Albert M. Muchanga, Commissioner for Trade and Industry, African Union

The landmark African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2018 and now in its operational phase, will establish a single African market for goods and services, accompanied by the free movement of people and capital. Bringing together 55 African Union member states with a combined population of more than one billion people and a combined GDP of over US$3 trillion, it is set to boost intra-African and pan-African global trade as one of the world’s largest trading blocs.

The Commonwealth draws among its membership 19 African states. All of them participated in the AfCFTA negotiations and have signed the AfCFTA Agreement but are at different levels of its ratification. At the secretariat level, the Commonwealth Secretariat has provided an experienced senior expert to render technical advice on the AfCFTA, making the Commonwealth a strategic contributor to this historic achievement.

With this background, it is important to bring to the attention of Commonwealth Heads of State and Government, the efforts being made to transform the economic and commercial landscape of Africa through the AfCFTA.

The operational phase of the AfCFTA was launched in July 2019, in Niamey, Niger, at an extraordinary session of the Assembly of the African Union Heads of State and Government. In so doing, the African leaders unveiled supporting instruments to facilitate trade under the new continental market from 1st July, 2020.

The key operational instruments that will give substance to the market are: a regime on rules of origin, schedule of tariff concessions for trade in goods, schedule of specific commitments for trade in services, an online mechanism for reporting, monitoring and elimination of non-tariff barriers, pan-African payments and settlement system and African trade observatory.

The rules of origin will promote value addition and also remove trade deflection, critical to ensuring fair competition. Trade liberalisation in goods and services lays the groundwork for the creation of a single African market and, in the process, generating large economies of scale and scope. The associated 90 per cent level of tariff liberalisation establishes a commercially viable market. Elimination of non-tariff barriers will complement liberalisation by ensuring that these do not replace tariffs in protecting national markets. The payments and settlements system will facilitate timely and full payments for transactions and this will be supported by an annual guarantee of US$3 billion to promote win-win outcomes, unlike in the case where each national central bank makes guarantees for economic operators in its national territory. The trade observatory will provide trade information, vital to the expansion of intra-African trade.

In addition to the foregoing, the Accra-based AfCFTA Secretariat was commissioned in March 2020 with a Secretary-General, His Excellency Wamkele Mene, already in post. It will be responsible for implementing the AfCFTA Agreement and the soon to be negotiated protocols.
on investment, competition policy, intellectual property rights and e-commerce, which are all aimed at deepening the market and making it more attractive.

Analyses by the UN Conference on Trade and Development and the UN Economic Commission for Africa show that the AfCFTA is net trade-creating, offering long-term gains. A study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also shows that it will enhance welfare across Africa, including among the small economies. A recent World Bank study equally brings out positive economic and distributional impacts of the AfCFTA. It shows that African women will greatly benefit as they constitute the majority of those engaged in intra-African trade; 68 million Africans will also be lifted out of poverty and real income gains from full implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement could increase by seven per cent, or nearly US$450 billion.

The private sectors in both Africa and the rest of the world have welcomed these positive developments and are geared to expanding investments and trade in this large market with huge potential for growth. The African governments are also highly committed – 54 states have so far signed the agreement and 28 have ratified it.

As we move towards the start of trading under the AfCFTA, a notable feature is that intra-African trade is currently at 15-18 per cent, making it start as a shallow market. Herein lie enormous opportunities, offering vast room for rapid market expansion and deepening. This is complemented by Africa’s relatively young population of 1.27 billion people (median age 19 years) with its growing middle class. These circumstances provide a consumer base with huge growth potential making it an attractive market for visionary investors.

The AfCFTA faces three urgent tasks required for it to have added

“...to have added...”


“A recent World Bank study shows that 68 million Africans will be lifted out of poverty and real income gains from full implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement could increase by seven per cent, or nearly US$450 billion.”
substance and credibility. The first is to start the trading with traction, a firm grip that energetically propels the market forward. In this connection, we need right from the beginning, to open a market characterised by active, efficient and increasing transactions that will enable it to meet the second task. This is to rapidly exploit the huge growth potential. The third immediate task is to generate resilience. Africa has historically been a victim of cyclical commodity price fluctuations delivering boom and bust cycles of development. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to this by demonstrating that far worse disruptions can unexpectedly come at any time. The AfCFTA should enable African trade to emerge stronger, more dynamic and resilient. Export diversification is a key factor and the AfCFTA offers numerous opportunities for this through the development of domestic and regional value and supply chains. Harnessing export diversification requires African countries to engage in trade among themselves through value-added products. To achieve this, the complementary task is to invest in learning how to manufacture high quality and competitively priced products. The key operational elements to make this work are collaboration among governments, the private sector and academia in research and development to promote product design and development, training, development of quality infrastructure, marketing, branding and logistics, as well as reliable transport and communication networks, among other levers of harnessing technological capabilities required to increase value addition in manufacturing and agro-processing for the AfCFTA market. The African Union Summit on Industrialisation and Economic Diversification planned for November 2020 in Niamey, Niger, is expected to give dynamism to the growth and resilience of African manufacturing and agro-processing. We are now on the edge of entering the uncharted territory of implementing the AfCFTA Agreement and pioneering operationalisation of continent-wide economic integration across Africa.

“We are now on the edge of entering the uncharted territory of implementing the AfCFTA Agreement and pioneering operationalisation of continent-wide economic integration across Africa.”

ABOVE: Intra-African trade currently stands at 15-18 per cent. African women will greatly benefit from the AfCFTA as they constitute the majority of those engaged in intra-African trade.

“We are now on the edge of entering the uncharted territory of implementing the AfCFTA Agreement and pioneering operationalisation of continent-wide economic integration across Africa.”
What is the AfCFTA?

In 2018, member countries of the African Union took a major step to boost regional trade and economic integration by establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The regional trade agreement that came into effect on 30 May 2019 has the potential to be a game changer for the continent and multinational corporations (MNCs) looking to do business in Africa, with a consumer market of 1.2 billion people and a combined GDP of US$2.5 trillion.

Not only does the AfCFTA present a unique opportunity to significantly grow intra-Africa trade and diversify trade exports on the continent, but also for European firms to capitalise on the new business and growth opportunities that it will create.

How does the AfCFTA benefit African economies, and what investment opportunities does this create for European MNCs?

The AfCFTA is the most significant step we’ve seen towards expanding intra-Africa trade across regional economic communities, enhancing competitiveness between African economies and making Africa a more attractive location for global financial institutions, asset managers and private equity investment. Take intra-Africa trade, for example. A measure of how integrated African economies are, intra-Africa trade has remained in the low teens for much of the past decade but has inched up to about 17% currently. A key focus of Phase 1 (trade of goods and services) of the AfCFTA will be on the application of zero tariffs on 90% of goods and services traded as well as on reduction of non-tariff barriers. The successful implementation of Phase 1 is expected to grow intra-Africa trade by around 50% by the mid-2020s. This growth in intra-Africa trade will ensure that an increasing proportion of Africa’s more than US$2 trillion economy is traded within Africa, creating opportunities for growth in industries and building of new factories to meet the demand.

With a GDP that is currently at US$2.2 trillion or US$6.3 trillion in purchasing power parity terms, a successful implementation of the AfCFTA will also generate an opportunity for MNCs to both grow and diversify Africa’s export base. Of the 17% intra-Africa trade, South Africa accounts for 34% of the intra-Africa trade exports, with Nigeria (9%), Egypt (6%), Ivory Coast (4%) and Zimbabwe (4%) being the other notable economies that contribute relatively significant export numbers to Africa’s intra-regional exports. South Africa also accounts for 20% of the intra-Africa trade imports. In addition to trade finance, the AfCFTA is set to be a catalyst for structural transformation across the continent. The reduction of non-tariff barriers, application of zero tariffs and increased integration will lead to more factories built across the continent as industries develop. This growth will require more international investment in power generation, transport and communications infrastructure.

What implementation challenges does the AfCFTA face across the continent, and how can European MNCs prepare?

Firstly, whilst 54 of the 55 African countries have already signed the agreement, only 28 countries (by recent count) have ratified the agreement through their parliaments. The practical implementation of AfCFTA however does not immediately become possible on ratification; the tariff schedules and service sector commitments (which will form part of the Protocols on Trade in Goods and Trade in Services respectively) are still being negotiated.

Secondly, to achieve diversification and the spread of the economic benefit across African countries, the removal of non-tariff barriers will be critical. The successful implementation of zero tariffs for 90% of goods and services traded intra-Africa, and (specifically) the removal of non-tariff barriers, should diversify the economic benefits to African economies which may naturally have lower labour costs, compared to the likes of South Africa and other more developed African economies.

Whilst the elimination of tariffs could, over time, substantially increase intra-African trade, the benefits of freer trade will not materialise unless accompanied by procedures and rules to remove Africa’s numerous Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs). These include a wide range of restrictive practices that make trade difficult, inefficient and costly e.g. customs clearance delays, restrictive licensing processes, certification challenges, uncoordinated transport related regulations and corruption. However, whilst the countries still have to agree on the schedule of goods and services for zero tariffs, what is encouraging is that many of the African countries already trade under free-trade areas in their respective economic regional communities such as SADC, ECOWAS, and EAC. Here, partnering with the right African bank to navigate local challenges created by the AfCFTA across regional markets cannot be understated. And whilst there are still lots of dependencies, we’re certainly seeing more positives than negatives on the journey to 01 July 2020.

What does the AfCFTA mean for Europe-Africa relations?

Ultimately, the anticipated overall growth in intra-Africa trade as a result of the AfCFTA will generate significant opportunity for MNCs looking to operate in and strengthen Europe-Africa trade, infrastructure and investment ties. The formation of AfCFTA is a bold vote of confidence in the value of international economic integration at a time when trade conflicts around the world are rife, trade barriers are rising and the future a bold vote of confidence in the value of international economic integration at a time when trade conflicts around the world are rife, trade barriers are rising and the future of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is under threat. It is all the more striking because African countries have often remained on the periphery of global trade liberalization initiatives in the past. But with the level of strong commitment that the AU member states have shown, now is the time for European firms to step into the most vibrant continent on earth as we potentially stand on the eve of Africa stepping into her own economic greatness by realising together is the best way to enhance prosperity.

What is the impact of COVID19 on the AfCFTA?

The collapse of the global and the African regional economies have taken attention away from AfCFTA. This has slowed up the preparations in the lead up to the July start date. This applies specifically to (a) the schedule of good and services for zero tariffs application, and (b) the finalization of the rules of origin protocol. This is so as countries have shifted focus and resources away from AfCFTA (and other initiatives) and directed these towards Covid19 health, economic and social challenges. In the short term, reduced economic activities have made countries to be inwardly focused.

The secretary of the AfCFTA has announced that the go-live date will be postponed but no new information is available on the new date of implementation. Whilst the AfCFTA activities have slowed down, opportunities have also opened up as global supply chains have been disrupted. The disruption of global supply chains is opening up opportunities to create regional value chains within the African continent. The AfCFTA zero tariff protocol for 90% of goods and services provides opportunities for global and regional corporates to base production within the Free Trade Area. As part of the AfCFTA, the continent can identify sectors and industries that it can immediately invest on to reduce dependency on China (in particular) and other regions (in general) for its own critical goods and services.
COMESA is the largest regional economic community in Africa, offering businesses the best opportunity for overcoming the diminutive size of national economies. With 21 member states (eight of which are also members of the Commonwealth), a population of 560 million people and gross domestic product of US$754 billion, COMESA is a major marketplace for both internal and external trading.

However, the small size of the markets of individual countries was recognised early on as a major drawback. To address this, the Free Trade Area was launched in 2000, to which member states that enlist enjoy free movement of goods and services produced within the bloc, with the removal of all tariffs and non-tariff barriers (NTBs).

Since then, intra-COMESA export of goods has risen from US$1.5 billion in 2000 to over US$10 billion. However, this excludes small scale (informal) trade, which is estimated by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) to be about 40 per cent of total trade. While these figures are still very low in absolute terms, the growth is remarkable.

What is even more remarkable is the potential, as well as the possibility of, introducing wholly new products and industries through innovation.

The COMESA region now stands on the brink of a new industrial revolution, driven by new generation information technologies such as high speed internet, cloud computing, blockchain and artificial intelligence. Yet, traders and service providers are not yet taking full advantage of advanced technologies or innovative business models to expand their trade horizons.

The state of digitalisation varies across sectors in the COMESA region, particularly between high-tech and more traditional areas, and in the use of ICT as a tool to enhance regional integration through trade among different member states. It is on this premise that COMESA sought to establish the COMESA Digital Free Trade Area (DFTA) for its 21 member states, anchored under the theme ‘COMESA – Towards Digital Economic Integration’.

The COMESA DFTA is about empowering traders to do cross-border trade using ICT as a tool, to minimise physical barriers for enhancement of intra and global trade. The platform has the potential to double the growth rate of the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the COMESA region in the export sector. Recent research shows that the region would gain US$17.5 billion annually in intra-COMESA exports if all member states fully implemented the digital reforms that involve the use of paperless trade facilitation measures.

COMESA DFTA has three thrusts, namely: eTrade, eLogistics and eLegislation. The eTrade aims at promoting electronic commerce by providing an online platform and necessary facilities such as e-payment, e-tax and mobile apps for regional traders for online trading. E-logistics seeks to improve the commercial activity of transporting goods from the source to the destination. It focuses on building on existing digital instruments and developing new cutting-edge systems. E-legislation will provide...
professionals and the general public with free electronic access to applicable laws and procedures regarding import, export and transit, as well as facilitation of digital transactions and e-payments in member states.

COMESA has been impactful in logistics in the use of ICT as a tool to improve the commercial activity of transporting goods from the source to the destination. An array of digital tools are already in place and some have been replicated in other regions. These include the Regional Customs Transit Guarantee (RCTG) System, which was developed to facilitate the movement of goods under customs seals in the COMESA region. It is accessible on a daily basis by customs officers, clearing and forwarding agents and insurance companies.

The COMESA Yellow Card, essentially a digital system for regional third party motor vehicle insurance, provides third party legal liability cover and compensation for medical expenses resulting from road traffic accidents caused by visiting motorists.

The Regional Payment and Settlement System (REPSS) helps importers and exporters deal with their local commercial banks for trade documentation. Payments are channelled through the central bank of the importer to that of the exporter using the REPSS platform, which assists in settling them. Currently, nine central banks are live on the platform with the rest in various stages of onboarding.

The COMESA Virtual Trade Facilitation System (CVTFS) is an electronic trade facilitation scheme with a cargo tracking management system, developed and integrated with other national and regional structures to monitor consignments along different transport corridors across the region.

An online system for reporting and resolving NTBs is also in place and this has greatly helped in understanding the kind, frequency and category of NTBs that are encountered by economic operators as they do their business in the tripartite region (COMESA, East African Community and the Southern Africa Development Community).

COMESA Court Digital Justice System now provides a paperless digital courtroom after signing up with Case Lines. The system eliminates the need for paperwork and presents an entirely digital platform with tools that allow the creation and presentation of a fully digital bundle. This includes multimedia evidence, collaboration tools for enhanced pre-trial preparation and a secure role-validated video conferencing for virtual hearings.

Another system in place is the COMSTAT regional database, which provides an online statistics database for COMESA’s import, export and transit goods and services. This is interfaced with national statistics authorities.

COMESA, in partnership with the African Development Bank, has established an online platform dubbed the 50 Million African Women Speak Platform. It is available via web and on mobile devices and is a practical initiative to empower millions of women in Africa to start, grow and scale-up businesses by providing a one-stop-shop for their specific information needs.

In partnership with UNCTAD, COMESA has further established a Customs Automation Regional Support Centre to increase the operational capacity of Customs Administrations, by improving knowledge and skills of functional and technical staff in COMESA countries. The centre shall also create the Regional Trade Portal as well as assisting member states to create guidelines for local Trade Information Portals.

The development of the full range of COMESA digitisation programme instruments is still underway. The focus now is to build on the existing digital instruments and develop new cutting-edge systems. These include the electronic certificates of origin (eCO) system to provide web-based facilities for the process of exporter registration and application, issuance and verification of the certificates.

As the coronavirus pandemic sweeps across the globe with devastating socioeconomic effects, mostly precipitated by restriction on physical contacts, the need for our economies to shift to digital systems has never been so critical. COMESA is now urging member states to speed up the enacting of necessary legislation to allow for digital trading, and those that have the basic enabling laws to implement the DFTA. This will go a long way to not only facilitating trade, but also in mitigating similar crises in future.

The rollout of the full range of digital trade facilitation instruments requires huge investments, but this is crucial as it will transform international trade, and help overcome barriers related to transport and other transaction costs. It will help traders/SMEs to overcome the complex regulations, processes and barriers, and eventually encourage businesses and traders to connect and collaborate in cross-border trading using digital means.

“The COMESA region now stands on the brink of a new industrial revolution, driven by new generation information technologies such as high speed internet, cloud computing, blockchain and artificial intelligence.”
Transport in Africa: Connecting the continent to sustainable and inclusive development

Makhtar Diop, the World Bank’s Vice President for Infrastructure, acknowledges the current lack of connectivity across the continent and argues that sustainable, resilient transport is a critical public good and a foundation for social and economic development and a better life for all Africans.

To realise Africa’s enormous development potential, sustainable transport must be embedded in the poverty reduction strategies that promote inclusive economic growth and the acceleration of regional integration efforts. And now, it must also be at the heart of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenge is steep. Africa is the least connected region of the world: half of the population does not have access to an all-weather road to bring their products to markets, and although our continent is home to 17 per cent of the world’s population, it contributes only two per cent of global air passenger traffic.

This lack of connectivity has direct impacts, not only in the economy, but on the wellbeing of people that need to access education, health and jobs. Inadequate capacity and inefficient connections between African ports, railways and road corridors lock countries out of global value chains and increase costs considerably. African businesses pay 56 per cent more than the world average to import a container, and this can reach 270 per cent in landlocked countries. Overall, transport costs in the continent represent up to 40 per cent of the final price of goods.

COVID-19 has made long existent vulnerabilities starkly more visible, with a series of immediate supply and demand shocks. In early May 2020, there were 45 per cent fewer cargo vessels than normal in the world’s ports. Protectionist efforts are also distorting markets. Rebalancing supply and demand across the globe will be a gradual and extended process, especially if there are new infection waves.

In Liberia, although disruptions in the food supply chain are still minimal, we are working with the government to ensure the supply chains are sustained.

Much is being done by African governments and the international community, with initiatives such as the World Bank-financed East Africa Trade and Transport Facilitation project, which contributed to a reduction in transit time from Kigali to Mombasa from 19 to five days, and reduced border crossing times by up to 30 per cent. However, a lot more is needed to connect Africa to the world and bring the benefits of sustainable mobility to all Africans. Tackling transport’s environmental challenges is part of that.

Although Africa contributes very little to the global climate crisis, it is now faced with adapting to its impact. The continent’s transport infrastructure is especially exposed: under pessimistic climate predictions, stress on roads by increased rains will result in rehabilitation costs ten times above historical averages, while the damage caused by flooding is expected to have a 17-fold increase over what we typically see today. An estimated 300,000 bridges on critical road links are particularly at risk, and will require increases in maintenance costs of two to seven times the historic averages.

The devastation brought by cyclones Idai and Kenneth is an indication of this new normal of stronger, more frequent and extreme weather events endangering Africa. Recognising that road maintenance remains the most effective method for shielding roads from the effects of climate change, the World Bank’s emergency support to Mozambique adopted a capacity-building and
‘build back better’ approach that incorporates these concerns.

In addition to building resilience, the World Bank is helping clients in Africa to address the greenhouse gas emissions of their transport systems while meeting their development priorities. We support the implementation of their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) emission reductions, focusing on funding low-carbon freight corridors that maximise rail use, and expanding urban transport solutions that improve accessibility while reducing emissions and pollution.

As the fastest urbanising continent, Africa needs to put in place sustainable urban transport systems to meet the rapidly growing demands of its cities. Besides taking thousands of private cars and their emissions off the congested streets of Lagos, a World Bank-funded Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project increased accessibility to jobs and services, reducing journey times by approximately 30 per cent, and bus journey costs by roughly 50 per cent along the improved BRT corridors.

We must also explore innovative solutions. Africa can—and should—look into developing e-mobility solutions that respond to the needs of its cities. The average age of private vehicle fleets in many African countries exceeds 20 years, and a significant share is imported as used cars from outside the continent. These cars often have obsolete safety and environmental standards. In general, reducing the age of fleets and using existing fuel-efficient technologies could cut the average vehicle fuel consumption by 50 per cent, with major impacts on emissions and street-level pollution. Even more urgent is making sure that vehicle imports have the necessary safety features, which would save countless lives. In fact, despite having only two per cent of the world’s vehicles, Africa has 20 per cent of global road traffic deaths—the highest rate in the world.

Transport is a critical public good, and that’s why we are redoubling our commitment to supporting transport as a foundation for Africa’s social and economic development.

In its new Development Plan, the Africa Transport Policy Program, administered by the World Bank, will address transport infrastructure management in Africa under the lens of climate resilience. On the same token, the Sustainable Mobility for All initiative is working with South Africa and Ethiopia—the first countries to pilot the Global Roadmap for Action Towards Sustainable Mobility—to achieve the four goals of sustainable mobility: universal access, efficiency, safety and green mobility.

As African countries rethink their transport systems in the aftermath of COVID-19, decarbonisation should be at the top of the agenda. The tools are there to move towards cleaner and more resilient transport that also promotes global connectivity, green economic growth, jobs, more opportunities and a better life for all.

“Africa is the least connected region of the world: half of the population does not have access to an all-weather road to bring their products to markets.”
Securing Diverse and Sustainable Nutrition for All: The role of trade

Dr Qu Dongyu, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, explains how trade has vastly improved the availability, affordability and stability of food supplies across the world, and calls for enhanced coherence between trade policy and nutrition action to address the complex and continually evolving relationship.

One of the greatest challenges of modern times is to ensure that everyone has access to healthy, affordable, safe and culturally acceptable foods – not just for now but also in the future.

The latest State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report showed that more than 820 million people suffered from chronic hunger in 2018 (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2019). Secondly, that overweight, obesity and its associated noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are on the rise and affect over two billion people worldwide.

The global nutrition situation is driven by food systems that are not delivering on healthy diets. Our current food systems are challenged to provide adequate, safe and diversified diets for all due to a number of factors. However, unsustainable production and consumption patterns have contributed to high greenhouse gas emissions, environmental degradation, food losses and waste, and loss of biodiversity and essential ecosystems services. “Unsustainable production and consumption patterns have contributed to high greenhouse gas emissions, environmental degradation, food losses and waste, and loss of biodiversity and essential ecosystems services.”
gas emissions, environmental degradation, food losses and waste, and loss of biodiversity and essential ecosystems services. Our food production systems account for 24–30 per cent of the total greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, food systems directly contribute to 75 per cent of biodiversity loss and use about 70 per cent of the world’s available freshwater resources. There is a global call for food systems transformation to address all forms of malnutrition and all the trade-offs that are foreseen to achieve this global call.

Several factors such as urbanisation, income growth, rapid population growth and increasing globalisation are driving dietary patterns through changes in the food environment and subsequently food consumption patterns. For example, trade has increased the availability and affordability of foods, contributed to the stability of food supplies and made seasonal foods available all year round. At the same time, it has increased the chances that food produced in one region will affect the health and diet of people living in another region.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include trade as one of the key means to achieving the targets related to food security and nutrition. The outcome documents of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) in 2014 – the Rome Declaration on Nutrition and the Framework for Action – acknowledge trade’s important role in reducing malnutrition.

The relationship between trade and access to healthy diets and nutrition, however, is complex and continues to evolve. On one hand, it

“Several factors such as urbanisation, income growth, rapid population growth and increasing globalisation are driving dietary patterns through changes in the food environment and subsequently food consumption patterns.”

BELOW:
Farmers harvesting cabbages in Kabala Town, Sierra Leone.
is recognised that trade can enhance the availability and affordability of diverse foods, provide greater choice for consumers, and help smoothen food supply and cushion domestic production. For instance, trade has played a role in increasing global daily energy intakes and shifts in diets away from carbohydrates towards fats and proteins, helping tackle hunger and food insecurity.

Trade can also be helpful in the context of the growing challenges of climate change in balancing food deficits and surpluses among countries and regions. Furthermore, greater openness to global markets can bring down the cost of food for consumers and contribute to price stability.

On the other hand, trade has been blamed for increasing the availability and affordability of highly processed foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt, thus aiding the global epidemic of overweight, obesity and NCDs. Recent studies from Peru and Vietnam have found association between trade liberalisation and increased consumption of soft drinks, although still more solid evidence is needed.

With the deadline for Agenda 2030 and the Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025) fast approaching, we need to find ways to increase synergy and coherence between national trade and nutrition policies and to maximise the role that trade can play in making healthy diets accessible to all.

To optimise the positive effects of trade for nutrition, trade reforms would need to be complemented by targeted domestic policies designed to improve the nutritional status of the population, tailored to the country-specific needs. The ICN2 Framework for Action made two recommendations on how countries can use trade and investment to support nutrition. Firstly, by identifying opportunities to achieve global food and nutrition targets through trade and investment policies; and second, by improving the availability and access of the food supply through appropriate trade agreements and policies and to endeavour to ensure that such agreements and policies do not have a negative impact on the right to adequate food in other countries.

Domestic policies influencing food environments, and in particular, regulation of school environments, food reformulation and fiscal measures, have the potential to improve nutrition. Also effective in promoting healthy diets are consumer-oriented policies that support informed consumer choices,
through advertising restrictions, public information campaigns, social marketing, nutrition labelling, labelling regulations and the selective application of food taxes. These measures may complement or counteract the effects of trade policies, and that is why the nature of the nutritional objective and the context of the local food system (level of import dependency, market access, etc.) should guide the choice of the policies to be implemented.

 Commonwealth countries have been very active in past years, putting in place domestic nutrition and food environment policies that complement existing trade norms and mitigate potential negative effects of certain trade practices. Some countries, including Australia, Jamaica, Malaysia and Vanuatu have issued mandatory standards for school foods. These can have the effect, as they did in Chile, of stimulating the national and international food industries to reformulate their products to ensure the possibility of selling in schools. A number of Commonwealth countries have also introduced local taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages to influence consumption.

 An example of a comprehensive set of trade and fiscal policies comes from the Kingdom of Tonga. The country implemented measures that included a mix of excise tax, consumption tax and customs duty on various food products as part of their fight against NCDs. These diseases are a particular problem in the Pacific region, and in Tonga, one in four people is likely to die prematurely from them. The Tongan diet has undergone a transition from a traditional diet of fish, root crops, fruits and vegetables to a more convenient, cheaper diet of imported, highly processed packaged foods. The applied measures included lowering the customs duty on some foods like fresh fish, vegetable oil and tinned fish, and introducing or raising taxes on other foods like lard, carbonated drinks, turkey tails, mutton flaps, fatty chicken leg quarter cuts and ice cream. Tax-induced price changes have caused consumers to reduce their consumption of these food products to different degrees.

 Lessons learned include the need for ensuring that healthier substitutes are available and affordable, having well-planned complementary consumer awareness and education programmes running in parallel to the food taxation strategy, as well as greater consultation with relevant stakeholders, including consumers, and paying greater attention to culture and traditions in decision-making processes.

 It is expected that consumption patterns will continue to evolve in line with economic growth, urbanisation and changing lifestyles, with expanding demand for products high in proteins, such as meat and dairy products, sugar and vegetable oils, which will influence global trade flows. Cheaper and more convenience foods that are high in calories and fats and low in nutrients imply a growing burden of overweight and obesity, in particular in low-income countries. It is essential, in this regard, to strengthen the synergy and coherence between trade policy and nutrition action to benefit consumers and enhance food security and nutritional outcomes, without compromising the prospects for producers. To tackle the multiple burden of malnutrition successfully, policy makers need to consider the spectrum of policy options that exist across the food system, taking into consideration the trade-offs.

 Finally, in the midst of COVID-19, governments should ensure that food supply chains are protected and agricultural trade and markets are kept open, both internationally and domestically. It is important to ensure that consumers have access to healthy diets, including by facilitating trade and lowering tariffs especially for nutritious foods. Disruptions to food supply chains and trade can have devastating food security and nutritional consequences, especially for the poor and most vulnerable.

 “It is essential to strengthen the synergy and coherence between trade policy and nutrition action to benefit consumers and enhance food security and nutritional outcomes, without compromising the prospects for producers.”

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 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Rome, Italy.
Through the fog of sadness, trauma and sacrifice that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon us, we catch glimpses of better times ahead. The prospect of a more equitable world lies out there, governed by principles of sustainability and resilience. Our challenge is to choose the best direction to take us there, the way that will ensure we are not inadvertently, or even knowingly, returning to more misery in the future. Surely, with all that we now know, the right way to go must be the blue-green recovery road.

We will need a guide to take us along the recovery road and, fortunately, we are well-equipped. We have the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, coupled with the Paris Climate Agreement. Through these, we can ensure that short-term recovery solutions are in accord with long-term development and climate action objectives. And, we also have the Commonwealth Blue Charter, conveniently at hand to provide tools for the journey ahead.

Perhaps the greatest risk of the COVID-19 pandemic is that we lose sight of the most fundamental challenge facing humanity, namely that of reducing our greenhouse gas emissions to levels that will keep global warming below 1.5°C. The reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) make it abundantly clear that venturing above that figure will place the security of future generations in great jeopardy. In 2018, a special report on global warming from the IPCC told us that: ‘limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society’. Back then, achieving unprecedented change in the short term may have seemed a tall order, but not so today. In 2020, every one of us has experienced what a version of unprecedented change is like, and while pandemics are not the prescription for mitigating climate change, they do demonstrate possibilities.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were profligate burners of fossil fuels, single-use plastic planet-polluters, wanton denigrators of nature, and on course for global warming of over 3.5°C by the end of this century. Once crossed, the dreaded line of 2°C warming would witness the ocean losing coral reefs – home to 30 per cent of its biodiversity. What would that mean for the health of the ocean? At this stage, the truth is we don’t know; but let us at least agree that it would not be good. That in itself is an existential prospect for us all, for without a healthy ocean, we know we cannot have a healthy planet.

Global-warming greenhouse gas emissions are our common enemy. They are the cause of the ocean’s
falling oxygen levels and rising levels of acidity, both of which are increasingly stressing life under the waves. Our escalating greenhouse gas emissions are the cause of the warming of the ocean, by which coral is bleached, ecosystems lost, extreme weather events fomented and sea levels made to rise ever upwards.

And so, when this pandemic retreats and we enter into the inevitably tough times of the recovery phase, the self-interest of our species demands that central to building back better, there must be unprecedented reductions in anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions around the world. Only then will we reverse the decline of the ocean’s health and best protect our own.

The vision of a blue-green post-pandemic recovery fully accepts the priorities of fostering economic development and creating employment, at the same time promoting greater social equity and welfare. In the energy sector’s transition to renewables, for example, it foresees innovative energy storage, the installation of flexible power grids, electric vehicle charging systems, green hydrogen and multiple other energy development technologies. All these will mean jobs, jobs and more jobs.

We have to move from linear exploitation of finite planetary resources into a sustainable era of circular economies. We must advance sustainable food systems, protect nature, develop resilient cities and rapidly transit into renewable energy systems – again, creating more and more jobs.

And, in the interest of the ocean’s health, when we say we will plant a trillion trees, we must ensure this includes the restoration of mangroves, seagrass and kelp, in the knowledge that they sequester four times more carbon than their terrestrial cousins.

Blue-green recovery foresees an end to the unconscionable levels of pollution and waste for which we have of late been responsible. It demands an end to harmful subsidies distorting such sectors as oil, gas and fisheries. It demands an end to the international scandals of illegal fishing, over-fishing and modern slavery at sea. What it expects of governments around the world is to look beyond the short term and put in place equitable policies and investment decisions that are in harmony with a sustainable future.

In the long run, the survival of our kind may be intrinsically linked to the fate of coral. Thus, the course of blue-green recovery must steer us well away from the dreaded territory of 1.5 to 2°C global warming. Staying true to that course is the ultimate obligation we have to our children and to life itself. Returning to our old ways will but resume a course towards devastating hurricanes, flooding coasts, vast wildfires, proliferation of famines and wars, massive displacement of populations and recurrence of global pandemics.

Enshrined in the Charter of the Commonwealth are core beliefs of respect and understanding, sustainable development and the importance of young people. The blue-green ethos has faith in the genius of our species, in our powers of innovation and our ability to share ideas and resources, with empathy in adversity. Since the Commonwealth is home to a third of the world’s population, its influence on the journey ahead will be massive. Let us release its genius, its powers of innovation, its capabilities of sharing, and set off together on the blue-green recovery road.

“Since the Commonwealth is home to a third of the world’s population, its influence on the journey ahead will be massive. Let us release its genius, its powers of innovation, its capabilities of sharing, and set off together on the blue-green recovery road.”
We Must Protect Our Environment: Our common wealth

His Excellency Danny Faure, President of Seychelles, calls for greater protection of the environment, particularly the world’s oceans, and highlights Seychelles’ commendable efforts to balance human and ecological wellbeing.

Danny Faure,
President, Republic of Seychelles

Safeguarding the oceans and marine life from climate change, acidification, overfishing, deep-sea mining, plastic pollution and other threats is a global responsibility. Much of the world’s food and half of the oxygen we breathe comes from ocean waters. The ocean is also the largest active carbon sink on earth, absorbing more than 25 per cent of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Allowing their continued abuse is self-destructive and invites catastrophe.

With the coronavirus pandemic, the world is facing a crisis of unprecedented magnitude. While it is a public health emergency, it is more accurately reframed as a planetary emergency. COVID-19 serves as a stark reminder of the consequences if we continue to inflict unchecked damage to our environment. There is overwhelming scientific consensus that humanity’s impact on the climate and biosphere causes more disease outbreaks and creates new channels for human exposure. COVID-19 is a wake-up call to remind us that we are the guardians of this planet and must act accordingly.

Over the years, we have created these problems. But we can solve them and
ocean and resilient planet. We use a public, transparent and participatory process. It ensures our endemic species and ecosystems have long term protection, improves their resiliency against climate change, and safeguards sustainable economic opportunities in vital sectors of our economy such as tourism and fisheries.

Our ability to cope with and recover from crises relies on our ecosystem’s resilience and adaptation. From this commitment emerges the vision of Seychelles’ Blue Economy – a shared opportunity and responsibility to use ocean space for conservation, adaptation, innovation and sustainable development. This is how we can restore planetary health and the balance between human and ecological wellbeing.

As we pave the way to pilot the management, surveillance and enforcement of what we have protected so far, I would like to call upon the support of existing and new partners who are bold and ambitious enough to accompany Seychelles on this next phase.

As we rebuild our societies, let us not forget that preventing future health crises relies on all of us addressing climate change and environmental priorities. Sustainable solutions should be an essential part of recovery efforts. We are running out of excuses to not take action and we are running out of time.
Our world is transfixed by the great human toll and economic impact of the worst global pandemic in a century. For the 65 million inhabitants of small island developing states (SIDS), the impact of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 is reminiscent of the worst forms of extreme weather events that they contend with annually. Such events cost lives, undermine our hard-earned development gains and hamper the aspirations and quality of life of our people. Our governments are routinely compelled to shift already scarce resources from social and economic investments, to recovery and sustenance, in the aftermath of disasters. For decades, islands have been treading an increasingly precarious development tightrope, with the intensification of adverse climate impacts.

The acute vulnerability of small islands to sudden systemic shocks is now being experienced by the world collectively. Ultimately, the hard decisions and tradeoffs that nations must make to secure human health are akin to the decisions that small islands have made to tackle the root causes of climate change and to advocate for planetary health. The one difference is that there is no potential vaccine to eradicate climate change, only global respect for and adherence to the Paris Agreement.

From the perspective of islands, the immediate responses to both the COVID-19 and climate change must reflect their intricate connection and profound compatibility. The current crisis is a compelling global reminder that our shared development aspirations and the climate emergency are inextricably linked.

Emblematically, the world’s foremost authority on climate science, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, warns that inaction on climate change is likely to pave the way for more frequent pandemics and a panoply of vector-borne diseases. Much like the existential climate crisis we face, the spontaneity of more frequent and global pandemics will be of greatest detriment to the most vulnerable – both directly through infections and by dwindling public support as governments struggle to shift resources from long-term development to crisis responses. Undoubtedly, these uncertainties are stark reminders that crisis financing is insufficient and too often pulls from development financing, leaving countries unable to address development in a sustainable way.

Our partners and international financial institutions must be bolder. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented economic crisis for islands, which need dedicated and predictable financing. Now more than ever, the 65 million people across SIDS – the majority of whom live in 25 Commonwealth states – call upon our Commonwealth partners and the wider global community to affirm the special case of SIDS and support a holistic approach to the criteria for all to access concessional or grant finance. Such an approach hinges upon much needed reform of the current crisis.
the global economic and financial system, to make it responsive to anticipated and unanticipated challenges associated with economic shocks and climate change.

On behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the Prime Minister of Belize, Rt Honourable Dean Oliver Barrow, has appealed to the IMF and World Bank to, inter alia, establish a special window for SIDS, expand their eligibility irrespective of income classification to access immediate support for the health crisis, and support the call to bilateral creditors to suspend debt payments. As AOSIS Chair, I have also supported the call by the UN Secretary-General for debt relief to our countries. While these measures most immediately address the health crisis, they will also enable SIDS to focus on the climate crisis. As we have seen, debt relief can be turned into a positive incentive for ambitious action.

The Commonwealth family is invited to support islands in addressing the climate emergency by embracing the SIDS climate and oceans agendas. There is no scientific doubt that the climate emergency and ocean crises are intricately linked. SIDS are custodians of 15 of the 50 largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), which account for nearly

“For the 65 million inhabitants of small island developing states, the impact of COVID-19 is reminiscent of the worst forms of extreme weather events that they contend with annually.”
one-third of all oceans and seas. SIDS, with their record of sustainable use and as responsible stewards, are primed for direct engagement and support for the conservation and sustainable use of our ocean.

The UN Environment found that SIDS are disproportionately more likely to enact bans on single-use plastics. Our strong connection and dependence on the marine environment have inculcated in us a commitment to maintain equilibrium between economic and social progress and environmental sustainability. AOSIS, as a SIDS advocacy mechanism, has embarked on an ocean agenda that foregrounds and transcends conservation – we want the activities of SIDS to unleash economic growth and diversification. It is for this reason that AOSIS strongly champions a ‘think blue’ strategy, and among our members, you will find early pioneers of the blue economy.

The blue economy simultaneously promotes economic growth, environmental sustainability, social inclusion and the strengthening of ocean ecosystems. The value of sustainable fisheries can be seen in our artisanal fishers and in broader sectoral actions. One such instance is the declaration of no-catch or no-take zones, referred to as replenishment zones in Belize. This, along with several other initiatives in Belize and in many other SIDS, has led to historic levels of fish stock replenishment and continues to be a significant source of high value fisheries-based sport tourism and general exports.

SIDS are also leading on balanced approaches to sustainable use of marine resources. My country, Belize, which chairs AOSIS, is the world’s first to ban offshore oil exploration. The country achieved this feat with popular nationwide support and a bottom-up approach. Our actions are indicative of a trend across SIDS, and several have already adopted national blue economy strategies. In 2013, Mauritius launched its oceans’ economy roadmap to tap into the potential of its EEZ, by consolidating existing sectors such as tourism, seaports and fishing and developing emerging sectors such as aquaculture, marine biotechnology and renewable energy.

Similarly, in 2018, the Seychelles launched its blue economic roadmap using an integrated approach to the sustainable development of ocean resources. The strategy is complemented by a marine spatial plan (2014), which prepared for the sustainable management and health of the Seychelles’ 1,374,000km² EEZ. In addition to national initiatives, the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) have also developed regional policies and plans, committing to sustainable ocean management and building sustainable blue economies in the region.

Small island and low lying coastal developing states are resolutely leading the charge in innovative approaches on climate and oceans. We need innovative financial approaches to unleash SIDS’ blue economic potential and advantage. Dear partners, we welcome you. Please seize the opportunity to engage with us.

“The blue economy simultaneously promotes economic growth, environmental sustainability, social inclusion and the strengthening of ocean ecosystems.”
CCRIF SPC limits the financial impact of natural hazard events to Caribbean and Central American governments by quickly providing short-term liquidity when a policy is triggered. CCRIF currently offers parametric insurance policies for tropical cyclones, earthquakes, excess rainfall and the fisheries sector. The Facility is a working example of a disaster risk financing instrument and one of a suite of such instruments available to governments to assist in post-disaster recovery and to help close the protection gap and ensure that we ‘leave no one behind’ in the development pathway. CCRIF was created as an immediate response to Hurricane Ivan in 2004, which caused billions of dollars of losses across the Caribbean, thus underscoring the need for quick liquidity after a natural disaster. Since its inception in 2007, CCRIF has made 41 payouts totalling US$152 million to 13 of its member governments – all within 14 days of the event. The single largest payout was US$20.4 million made to the Government of Haiti on its Tropical Cyclone policy following Hurricane Matthew in 2016. Also, following Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, CCRIF made payouts totaling US$55 million to 9 affected CCRIF member countries. CCRIF is working to bring new products to market for drought, the agriculture sector and public utilities.

**CCRIF SPC**
**FORMED 2007**

The world’s first multi-country risk pool based on parametric insurance

**Members**

19

3

**CENTRAL AMERICAN**

**PAYOUTS**

41

Totaling

US$152 MILLION

to 13 member governments

**PRODUCTS**

Parametric Catastrophe Insurance for:

- TROPICAL CYCLONES
- EARTHQUAKES
- EXCESS RAINFALL
- FISHERIES

“The truth is what we do at CCRIF is about supporting governments to help their populations – communities, businesses and key economic industries such as education, agriculture, and tourism. An assessment of the beneficiaries of CCRIF’s payouts show that over 2.5 million persons in the Caribbean and Central America have benefitted directly and indirectly from these payouts after a natural disaster.”

— CCRIF CEO, Isaac Anthony

**OUR DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS AND DONORS THROUGH THE YEARS**

Caribbean Development Bank • European Union • Government of Bermuda • Government of Canada

Government of France • Government of Germany • Government of Ireland • Government of Japan • Government of Mexico

Government of the United Kingdom • Government of the United States of America • KfW, Germany • The World Bank

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For 50 years, the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) has been serving a region to which thousands of visitors from across the globe flock each year, to bask in its enthralling beauty. Paradoxically, the mainly small island, developing and low-lying coastal states are also located in one of the most disaster-prone neighbourhoods in the world. Earthquakes resulting from intense seismic activity, and frequent extreme weather events including tropical storms, hurricanes and floods, have had adverse environmental, social and economic consequences. From 2000 to 2019, the Caribbean experienced 190 natural disasters, with three category five hurricanes – Irma, Maria and Dorian – since 2017. An estimated 15 million persons were affected; 238,000 deaths caused; and infrastructure loss and damage costing almost US$34 billion.

The inescapable reality is that the Caribbean is extremely vulnerable to climate change. Given the predictions for changes in precipitation patterns, rising sea levels, and increasingly frequent and intense extreme weather events, climate change will likely amplify disaster risks, economic costs and other impacts.

Undoubtedly, the region faces an enormous challenge to its sustainable development, with poor, rural and vulnerable coastal communities, whose livelihoods largely depend on climate sensitive sectors such as agriculture and fisheries, being disproportionately affected.

An aggressive response to better preparing these communities for withstanding the related shocks...
and disruption of climate change is, therefore, an urgent regional priority. The mounting loss and damage from extreme weather events has placed disaster risk management at the forefront of governments’ policy agendas and is being tackled on a number of fronts.

At the national level, the basic legal, regulatory and supervisory frameworks for natural disaster preparedness and response have been strengthened. Infrastructure, both public and private, is increasingly being constructed to meet certain minimum requirements, including climate resiliency. Governments have been scaling up financial risk management by building fiscal buffers in the form of national disaster funds, and budget allocations for low level national emergencies. Additional safeguarding is provided through financial risk transfer mechanisms, such as parametric insurance and contingent lines of credit.

Commitment to a regional approach to disaster risk management dates back to 1991, when the Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) approved the establishment of the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency, later renamed the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), as the regional intergovernmental agency charged with coordinating emergency response and relief efforts to participating countries.

Since then, CDEMA’s role has evolved to reflect more holistic approaches to disaster risk management. Now, national disaster emergency offices, in conjunction with CDEMA, are responsible for putting in place the necessary requirements for the annual hurricane season. These include arrangements for sheltering, activation of management and damage assessment teams and the stockpiling of supplies.

Promoting poverty reduction through inclusive and environmentally sustainable growth, and building resilience to external shocks and natural hazard events underpin all of CDB’s development assistance to its Caribbean member countries. In that regard, the Bank has adopted a holistic approach to supporting the Caribbean’s agenda for Comprehensive Disaster Risk Management through enhancing regional, national and local level capacities to mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from the adverse impacts of natural disasters.

This approach emphasises the strategic alignment and integration of disaster risk reduction and climate change considerations into development planning. It also embraces the implementation of appropriate policies, strategies and programmes for sound macroeconomic management, climate proofing of critical economic infrastructure, and adoption of renewable energy and energy efficiency practices.

Environmental sustainability and climate change have become key pillars of CDB’s financing strategy. The Bank has significantly increased its investment in resilient infrastructure, renewable energy and energy efficiency initiatives. For this purpose, it offers a range of financial instruments, including emergency grants and loans, immediate response loans, exogenous shock loans and rehabilitation and reconstruction loans.

Strong strategic partnerships have been built, for example with Global Affairs Canada, European Investment Bank, European Union and the UK Department for International Development, to expand access to appropriate financing for climate change adaptation work, including disaster risk management.

The Bank has also adopted procedures to minimise environmental and social risks from its lending activities and to timely address any complaints of alleged environmental and social harm. All projects incorporate climate and disaster risk screening.

Building resilience has been the unifying theme for the Caribbean’s regional approach to disaster risk management. Despite the complexity of climate change challenges, the future envisaged is one in which the Caribbean states become a showpiece, not only for their beauty, but also for their resilience. Working alongside national, regional and global partners, the CDB remains committed to helping all of its borrowing member countries to stay the course, overcome the obstacles and realise this ultimate goal.

“Despite the complexity of climate change challenges, the future envisaged is one in which the Caribbean states become a showpiece, not only for their beauty, but also for their resilience.”

“From 2000 to 2019, the Caribbean experienced 190 natural disasters, with three category five hurricanes since 2017.”
Sustainable Urbanisation in the Commonwealth

Dr Greg Munro, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, highlights the need for integrated action on sustainable urbanisation in order to deliver social, economic and environmental wellbeing across the Commonwealth’s rapidly expanding cities.

A total of four billion people – half the world’s population – live in urban areas today and by 2050, this is projected to grow to almost seven billion, or two-thirds of the global population. It is further predicted that, towards the end of this century, more than one billion people will live in just 20 cities, 60 per cent of which are in current Commonwealth member states.

While economies of scale can be leveraged in cities, and living standards in general are higher in urban areas, almost a third of all urbanised people live in slums. The global financing gap in cities for services and infrastructure currently stands at US$1 trillion annually.

For Commonwealth governments, cities are where they connect with the majority of their citizens. In addition to the provision of essential services such as water, waste and sanitation, primary health care and environmental management, cities are also the centres for education and training, innovation and entrepreneurship. They are the focus of economic development, trade and employment. Apart from the national tax regimen, almost every influencing factor on foreign direct investment decisions is based on the city (liveability, safety, ease of doing business, education and transport, among others). It is no surprise, then, that 80 per cent of global GDP is already generated in cities. However, they are also major contributors to climate change, with estimates suggesting that cities are responsible for 75 per cent of global CO2 emissions.

Former UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, stated that “our struggle for global sustainability will be won or lost in cities”. It is clear why.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)
11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Key focus areas of SDG 11 are identifying sustainable approaches, building appropriate capacity and skills, securing finance, innovative designs and delivery models and, importantly, ensuring multi-stakeholder engagement.

Sustainable urbanisation demands collective action and true multi-level governance, to empower, enable and support cities and their citizens, many of whom are currently grappling with poverty, informality, infrastructure deficits, a lack of economic opportunities, and with communities vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters.

It is essential, however, that urbanisation is viewed within the context of cities and wider human settlements. The urban rural continuum and the role of secondary cities and towns in food production, transport and supply chains, necessitates integrated planning. This is well recognised in Rwanda which, for some years, has integrated the developmental planning of Kigali with those of its secondary cities.

Our cities and human settlements provide the environment in which an increasing proportion of Commonwealth citizens live and work, and are key to the Commonwealth’s agenda for delivering social, economic and environmental wellbeing.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Kigali, Rwanda, has the five sub-themes of: Governance and Rule of Law; ICT and Innovation; Youth; Environment; and Trade. All of these intersect at a city level. Strong city leadership and good governance are essential for cities to prosper. A total of 60 per cent of Commonwealth citizens are aged under 30 years old and, if they are to have access to economic opportunities, trade, business development and incorporating informal economy drivers into city economies, will be required. There are numerous examples across the Commonwealth of cities using connectivity, information technology and innovation to deepen democracy and development. Many of these issues have been on the agenda of the members of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and, in particular, through its Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Network.

We need to learn from each other and the Commonwealth provides a unique platform from which to do this. It is possible to mobilise skills and expertise at all levels: across disciplines from the community, civil society organisations, private sector, academia, regional and municipal governments, to the nation state. The Commonwealth has the unique ability to convene key decision-makers at all levels to enhance policy, legislation, innovation and financing, in relation to its urban areas.

In response, at the forthcoming CHOGM, the Rwandan government, supported by Commonwealth countries and by a wide range of Commonwealth organisations representing local government, the business sector, academia and the built environment professions, are collaborating to advocate for a call to action that supports integrated action on sustainable urbanisation across the Commonwealth. In order to ensure that cities and human settlements have the capacity, skills and resources to deal with the challenges of rapid urbanisation; to adequately plan urban expansion; deliver services; stimulate urban economies and create inclusive, prosperous and resilient communities.

No single organisation, sector or country can deal with all of the challenges or identify and seize all of the opportunities in relation to urbanisation. We need collective, integrated, multidisciplinary and multi-sector action if we are to succeed. Under the leadership of the Heads of Government, the next CHOGM provides a unique opportunity to mobilise intergovernmental, associated and accredited organisations of the Commonwealth to create a meaningful partnership to support sustainable urbanisation.

Resources need to be dedicated to enhancing a more collaborative partnership for delivery, which can be enabled through the existing Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Network.

At the next CHOGM, we therefore have an important opportunity. Through the Commonwealth network, we can create a powerful mechanism to help shape our common future in sustainable urbanisation across our cities and human settlements, for the benefit of all of our citizens. The time to act is now.

“While economies of scale can be leveraged in cities, and living standards in general are higher in urban areas, almost a third of all urbanised people live in slums.”
Making the transition to decent employment is a struggle for millions of young people around the globe – particularly in the poorest Commonwealth nations where large sections of the population work in the informal economy.

Many of these countries’ growing youth populations face high levels of working poverty and rising unemployment, with youth unemployment across the Commonwealth in 2019 ranging from nine per cent in Malta to 57 per cent in South Africa.

This already worrying situation has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, with young people likely to be particularly hard hit by the economic fallout of the crisis.

Even before the virus outbreak, one in five young people around the world aged under 25 were classified as NEET - Not in Employment, Education or Training.

They and many young people now face additional challenges because of the pandemic.

Those in work are more likely than their more experienced co-workers to have their hours cut or be laid off. Those in non-standard forms of employment, such as part-time, temporary or ‘gig’ work are unlikely to qualify for unemployment benefits or social protection. While young people in the informal economy, who cannot afford to take time off to self-isolate, are more at risk of catching the virus, which means they are more likely to lose their livelihoods if they get sick.

Now is the time, therefore, to take urgent and concerted action not only to address the specific problems thrown up by the pandemic, but also to tackle the longstanding and pervasive issue of youth unemployment, particularly in many Commonwealth countries, where youth populations are rising, such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Tanzania and Vanuatu, among others.

This means focussing on some key areas, including investing in skills training, building information and employment services and promoting entrepreneurship.

Investing in education, training and skills, as outlined in the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work is paramount. This includes ensuring the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills before youth reach working age. Apprenticeships, and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) can address all too common mismatches between education, training and the needs of the labour market. They give young people the opportunity to learn a new trade to increase their chances of finding decent work. As technology continues to transform the world of work, there needs to be a continual...
assessment of the necessary skills for the future. Combined with training and skills matching, young people will be more employable.

All too often, young people fail to find decent work because they lack information about the needs of the labour market. Labour market information systems should target young people to help them match their skills to the demands of employers. Employment services targeting youth, training in job-search skills and job placement services will help young women and men find decent jobs in the short and long term.

Research has shown that promoting entrepreneurship among young people has a positive effect on employment and earnings outcomes, as well as business performance, particularly in low-income countries. Targeted training, coupled with advisory services, mentoring, technical coaching, access to entrepreneurship networks, as well as access to micro-finance, will help young people start and grow their businesses.

More broadly, wage subsidies, public works and employment guarantee programmes can help young people into work and to retain their jobs.

Ultimately, the youth employment challenge in Commonwealth countries requires a holistic policy approach that brings together macroeconomic, labour market and industrial policies. Pro-employment policies not only strengthen youth labour demand, but also create an enabling environment for youth-friendly financial services.

Taming the rising tide of youth unemployment in the Commonwealth – particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic – needs to be a priority if we want to avoid a lost generation of workers. This must be grounded in international labour standards and rooted in a ‘human-centred’ approach that treats young people and their future as a priority.

“Taming the rising tide of youth unemployment in the Commonwealth – particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic – needs to be a priority if we want to avoid a lost generation of workers.”
The future in Africa belongs to the youth, Africa has the youngest population globally. 62% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa was below 25 years in 2019. 31 years from now, in 2050, that population will be below 56 years. This will make Africa a continent of workers. The UN has reported that the working-age population, that is people aged between 25 and 64, is the fastest growing age group. But many of these potential workers are not working and if they are, they are not working optimally.

Most of the work on the continent is done in the informal sector. But the sector lacks standards and is characterized by crude working tools and poor working conditions. If you are a woman, the situation is worse. Women on the continent have a harder time accessing gainful employment than their male counterparts and experience worse working conditions.

KCB Foundation looks at the youth as the continent's biggest resource. As the millennials age, we see an opportunity for economic growth. We are investing in the youth and re-imagining the informal sector to cause a transformative disruption in the market. And we do this in two ways. The first is through our targeted skills and enterprise training programme 2jiajiri, which translates to ‘let’s employ ourselves’. The second is through our livestock value chain support programme Mifugo Ni Mali, which translates to ‘livestock is wealth’.

The change in the youth happens through our three-part transformation process. First, to address the lack of technical skills in the market, we sponsor training for new students in technical training institutions and for workers who already have skills to improve them and learn how to work using advanced tools. Second, we incubate them by offering Business Development Services. Here the youth are trained on how to register a business, create business development plans and proposals, marketing, bookkeeping and advertising. We also use our convening power to link them with the market. Third, when the graduates are ready and their ideas have been vetted for bankability, we give them loans to advance their business ideas. This is also the point where KCB Foundation exits and the Bank enters to support business growth.

2jiajiri is our flagship youth empowerment programme and it is at the forefront in revolutionizing the current approach to business. Since we started in 2016, we have had a total of 34,087 beneficiaries and in 2019 alone, we created 13,316 jobs! We have partnered with Mastercard Foundation to expand and scale up 2jiajiri through a programme called ‘Young Africa Works’. 
Young Africa Works targets 114,000 beneficiaries in Kenya categorised as Micro Enterprises, Small Enterprises spread across three economic sectors: Agriculture, Manufacturing and Construction. Kenya moved up the income bracket to a lower-middle income country. This programme is a roadmap to trickle down the country’s economic growth to the individual.

Under Young Africa Works, Mastercard Foundation has offered KCB Foundation a grant of $125 million which we will use to create 1.586 million jobs in Kenya over the next five years. The success of our vision is dependent on partners, and we are working with private sector partners to build an ecosystem around hydroponics farming in 28,000 greenhouses over the period. We want to catalyze an economic and industrial revolution through innovative and sustainable agricultural practices.

Jane Mwangi is Managing Director, KCB Foundation - the social investments arm of KCB Group Plc. She is a member of the KCB Group Executive Committee and also serves in the board of KCB Foundation as a Trustee. She has experience spanning more than 30 years in international development which gives her a unique edge to identify and steer ideas from concept to reality. She previously worked with USAID to design programs that built alliances between the US government and the private sector for the purpose of accelerating and sustaining development. Ms Mwangi conceptualised ‘2jiajiri’, as a job creation programme to skill Africa’s youth for self-employment across five East African Nations. The programme has received Continental and Global recognition and won Accolades for both the Bank and the Foundation including: 2018 Financial Times Award London (Bank of the Year - Banking in the Community), 2017 Euro Bank, London (Bank of the Year Banking in Society Award), and on a personal leadership level 2018 African Woman Leader Award by the World CSR Community, Mauritius and the 2020 Jacobs Well Award for Women living deliberately and impacting their society.
As the international community is getting to grips with the coronavirus pandemic, Africa keeps her eyes firmly on the horizon. In the distance lies the future: a young and vibrant population, ready to roll-up their sleeves. But the road to success is bumpy.

Africa’s future deserves a better deal. That’s why I am a strong advocate for the establishment of youth entrepreneurship investment banks – financial institutions for young Africans, by young Africans, that provide capital and guidance to kick-start their ventures and get up to speed. Despite years of economic progress, Africa’s youth unemployment has remained persistently high. Around one third of men and women aged under 35 are out of work. Many people have benefited from Africa’s resurgence, but more have missed out. According to projections by the African Development Bank Group, the continent needs to create an average of 1.7 million jobs to keep up with demand – per month, that is.

Africa has a task of titanic proportions on her hands. Yet, I believe there’s plenty of reasons to be optimistic: technological advances offered by the fourth industrial revolution could be Africa’s revolution and pave the way to an era of unprecedented prosperity. Our continent was unable to reap the fruits of previous industrial revolutions and has yet to make the most of the digital era. With a population set to double to 2.4 billion by 2050, we cannot afford anyone to miss out again. And we won’t.

The fourth industrial revolution is already becoming a reality in Africa, with the emergence of a wide array of applications that not long ago existed merely in the imagination of science fiction writers. Not only do these applications dramatically improve productivity, a study conducted by the African Development Bank Group in 2019 observed they are seeding entirely new areas of innovation. A prime example is agriculture, where the internet of things, big data and artificial intelligence give new appeal to an age-old industry that some mistakenly believed lacked earning power. The farmer of tomorrow doesn’t guide a plough but flies a drone.

Our research identified more than 6,500 start-ups on the continent, approximately 10 per cent of which developed applications related to the fourth industrial revolution. I’m proud of the young Africans rising to the challenge and making a name for themselves as technology entrepreneurs, creating jobs for their peers in the process. Africa’s youth is undeniably her greatest asset. They are smart, resourceful and bursting with energy. But it’s also an asset that remains untapped, as young Africans have limited access to finance. They do not yet have a track record, which makes traditional banks reluctant

“According to projections the African continent needs to create an average of 1.7 million jobs to keep up with demand – per month, that is.”

Youth Employment, Skills and Entrepreneurship for Africa’s Development

President of the African Development Bank Group, Dr Akinwumi A Adesina, explains how youth entrepreneurship investment banks will help young Africans to innovate and exploit the technological advancements that can make prosperity a reality for all in Africa.
to lend money. As a consequence, young Africans who want to begin a business are often dependent on financial support from family and friends.

In 2016, the African Development Bank Group launched a landmark Jobs for Youth in Africa strategy, with the aim of generating 25 million new positions within a decade. It focuses on practical, high-impact solutions that present opportunities through education and training, transformative jobs and a business environment that fosters entrepreneurs. We have made great strides, but the coronavirus pandemic threatens to throw a spanner in the works. The impact of COVID-19 on Africa’s youth unemployment is likely to be severe, as 95 per cent of young Africans earn their living in the informal economy. For them, a day without labour is a day without food.

Entrepreneurs frequently cite limited access to finance as the main impediment to growth and the biggest risk to their survival. We have to close the US$330 million financing gap that is currently nipping the aspirations of young Africans in the bud. Experts agree that harnessing the potential of Africa’s youth is a powerful engine for development. But, a chronic lack of funding is keeping the engine from revving.

Africa’s youth have the talent and drive to lift our entire continent out of poverty. Young Africans don’t need handouts. What they do need is a fair go and the tools to build their dreams – indeed, they need investment. At the African Development Bank Group, we stand ready to team up with our Commonwealth partners to make prosperity a reality. Because prosperity for Africa’s youth means prosperity for all.

“Entrepreneurs frequently cite limited access to finance as the main impediment to growth and the biggest risk to their survival.”

The African Development Bank Group is advocating the establishment of youth entrepreneurship investment banks to meet the growing and urgent needs of youth entrepreneurs across the continent.
Global Education Post COVID-19: The importance of multilateralism

UNESCO Director-General, Audrey Azoulay, highlights the impact of COVID-19 on global education and calls for collective action to capitalise on the innovations and lessons learned during the crisis to create more inclusive and resilient education systems.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, governments took drastic measures to stop the spread of the virus. For almost all countries, regardless of their region, size or economy, these measures included school closures. Institutions shut their doors to 1.57 billion learners – over 90 per cent of the global student population – and the world was forced to address the most unprecedented disruption in the history of education.

The situation triggered a global experiment in distance learning. To keep studying, children and young people began using a range of technologies – from online platforms to traditional media. This exposed social and digital divides, like the fact that 43 per cent of students have no access to the Internet at home (82 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa). It also highlighted what we already knew – that schools are not only places of learning, but places that provide social and physical protection, nutrition and emotional support.

This is especially true for the most disadvantaged groups, including girls. As diseases such as Ebola have shown, health crises can leave the poorest girls more exposed to violence, and some may never return to school. Extended school closures put the most disadvantaged students at risk of learning losses and dropping out, at a time when many countries are already falling behind in their commitments to education for all, as set down in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

At every step, COVID-19 has raised critical questions for governments: how do we reach students who lack access to technology? How do we support teachers so they can cope with a new learning reality? How do we manage important exams? When is it safe to reopen schools and how?

When global crises like these arise, the importance of multilateralism becomes all too clear. From the outset of the pandemic, UNESCO has worked to help find answers to these questions. As the lead UN agency for education, it provided a platform for education ministers and technicians to share experiences and pool solutions addressing these issues.

To bring together the tools and resources needed to address the crisis, UNESCO launched the Global Education Coalition, to help countries develop inclusive and equitable solutions so that ‘Learning Never Stops’ – our rallying slogan. In quick succession, some 90 partners stepped forward, including international organisations, non-profits, civil
society, private sector partners and media networks, offering a unique mix of expertise, innovation and resources. Focusing on three priorities – connectivity, gender equality and teachers – the Coalition is helping to establish e-learning platforms, providing free connectivity and learning tools, supporting teachers and campaigning to make sure that all learners return to school.

As a member of the Global Coalition, the Commonwealth of Learning is contributing to this articulated response – one that is first and foremost driven by a commitment to inclusion and equity. As these initiatives show, we are stronger when we work together. Collectively, we can anticipate, take action and look to the future, with multilateral institutions providing a space where everyone can work in partnership for global public goods, including education. We must capitalise on the innovations and lessons learned over the past few months to rethink education practices and develop more inclusive and creative learning paths.

Because there can be no going back to life before the crisis. COVID-19 provides a call to rethink our dominant model, to build greater resilience and to take bold steps to address inequalities and poverty. More than ever, this is the time to recommit to and protect education investments from the socioeconomic fallout of the pandemic.

Indeed, education is an engine of recovery. It is an investment in the people, talent, knowledge and skills that make up the wealth of every society. Governments and the international community cannot let an emerging recession roll back the decades-long progress made in expanding education. We now have an opportunity to build back better, with more solidarity, to make education systems more inclusive, flexible and resilient to future shocks.

Rethinking the future of education is the best investment we can make, for people and planet.

“Education is an engine of recovery. It is an investment in the people, talent, knowledge and skills that make up the wealth of every society.”

ABOVE:
Schools are not only places of learning, but places that provide social and physical protection, nutrition and emotional support. Extended school closures put the most disadvantaged students at risk.
As Commonwealth countries, along with the rest of the world, fight the coronavirus pandemic, their immediate focus is necessarily on the health response. Now is the time to save lives. But as that vital work is done, we cannot forget that the pandemic has also led to the biggest disruption to education that the world has ever seen.

The unprecedented disruption of education will have serious consequences for children's learning and their wellbeing, especially for the most vulnerable students. For many, the result could be a lifetime of poorer learning and health outcomes, and lower future earnings. Some, particularly the poorest girls, may never set foot in the classroom again.

These immediate impacts are so severe that it is hard to look beyond them. But the economic effects of the pandemic could mean that much worse is to come. The World Bank predicts that developing economies will shrink by more than two per cent in 2020, a huge shock considering that their growth rates have averaged over four per cent for the past 60 years. GDP will decline, reducing tax bases and impacting governments’ capacity to mobilise resources. Countries that depend heavily on commodity exports and those with high levels of external debt will be facing a liquidity crisis. Loss of livelihoods and reduced remittances will cause household incomes to fall, further exacerbating inequality.

If the experience of the 2009 financial crisis repeats itself, some governments may cut education budgets to boost liquidity. Even if education spending as a share of GDP is preserved, lower domestic revenues are likely to mean that countries fall even further behind in closing the already significant gap in the financing required to end the learning crisis and provide quality education for all. There is a very real risk that we will fall even further off track to meet SDG 4, the Sustainable Development Goal for education.

In this contracting fiscal space, Commonwealth countries will face difficult choices. Governments must not just safeguard the present in their response to this crisis, but also invest in the future. Right now, this means maintaining current education budgets, ensuring teachers continue to be paid and supported, sustaining learning for all students and equipping schools to reopen when it is safe to do so. Concerted national leadership, boosted by international support, including the COVID-19 fund created by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), can help with these unforeseen costs.
However, much more will be needed in the future to ensure that every child gets a great quality education. Both reform and financing will need to be the subject of coordinated efforts. Governments will need to increase education budgets over time and drive reform. International donors should increase investments and change efforts in education. GPE’s upcoming refinancing campaign in 2021 will be a critical milestone in ensuring that Commonwealth partners can recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and deliver quality education.

In exposing the fragility of education systems, the pandemic also offers us an opportunity to build back better. Building schools’ resilience to future closures may help us focus on designing learning so that no girl or boy is left behind. Remote learning at scale may offer solutions to reaching some of the 258 million children who were out of school before the pandemic. Delivering debt relief and restructuring, innovative financing and enhanced learning solutions could help us accelerate progress towards SDG 4, close the funding gap in the education sector and improve outcomes.

Education is fundamentally an investment in a country’s most precious resource – its people. Had Commonwealth heads of government met in June 2020, as planned, to discuss pressing global issues – climate change, employment, gender equality, innovation and peacebuilding – they no doubt would have reiterated that education is central to creating the human capital required to tackle each one of these challenges.

The pandemic brings this into even sharper focus. Investing in our children’s education should be the bedrock of plans to build strong and fair societies that can withstand the next great health crisis, limit global warming, enhance economic growth and harness the unrivalled technological opportunities of the 21st century.

Across the Commonwealth, there is a long-standing commitment to the shared values of democracy and human rights, including the right to education. These bonds and sense of solidarity are vital as we face the post-pandemic future together. Despite the trying times ahead, I am optimistic that this unique family of nations will rise to the challenge and emerge stronger than ever.

“In exposing the fragility of education systems, the pandemic also offers us an opportunity to build back better.”
Educating Girls: It’s time to match ambition with progress

Pakistan activist Malala Yousafzai is a UN Messenger of Peace and the youngest person ever to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. As co-founder of Malala Fund, she is on a mission to build a world in which every girl can learn and lead without fear, and urges Commonwealth leaders to accelerate progress by investing more in education and ensuring gender-responsive school curriculums.

Malala Yousafzai,
UN Messenger of Peace and Co-Founder, Malala Fund

Two-thirds of out-of-school girls live in the Commonwealth. These girls, as young as eight years old, are wearing wedding dresses instead of uniforms. They are working jobs or fleeing violence. The quality of education available to them might be so low that parents don’t think it’s worth the time and expense. Some have no schools at all.

On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect girls and young women. At the time of writing, Malala Fund estimates that 10 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school when the crisis is over.

Progress reports indicate that we’re still 100 years away from seeing every girl in school. But at the last Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in 2018, we saw reason for hope. For the first time, leaders agreed to urge their governments to ensure 12 years of quality education for all. They also agreed to support marginalised children, including girls forced to drop out of school.

I wish words were enough to secure the 129 million out-of-school girls the education they deserve. But no op-ed, speech or signed document alone can solve this issue - trust me, I’ve tried. As a Commonwealth citizen, I hope leaders will go beyond the communique and make real progress for girls.

At the next CHOGM in Kigali, education activists are looking for action to back up the words in that communique. We want to see Commonwealth leaders accelerate progress by investing more in education, and ensuring gender-responsive school curriculums.

This means investing in education that equips girls to thrive in changing climates and modern economies. It means recognising that discriminatory gender norms hold girls back and that young women too often face violence and harassment at school.

The forthcoming CHOGM will be a success if governments agree to:

• Ensure that poverty is never a barrier to a girl attending school, by eliminating school fees and providing cash transfers to offset lost income from girls not working;
• Invest 20 per cent of their national budgets in education; and
• Maximise the potential of education to create a more gender-equal society.
and economy by modelling gender equality in the classroom, promoting equality through how women and men are portrayed in textbooks and giving girls and boys equal opportunities - and encouragement - to learn all subjects.

We’ve all heard the evidence, but here it is again: educating girls reduces a country’s risk of conflict and is one of the most cost-effective strategies for tackling climate change. Last year, Malala Fund and the World Bank published research proving that if all girls completed secondary school, the global economy could see US$30 trillion in increased productivity and earnings.

But today, almost one billion girls and young women lack the skills they need to succeed in the modern workforce. With technology advancing every day, girls in many Commonwealth countries are falling further behind.

If we hope to build a better world, each of us must do what we can to make sure the next generation of girls can contribute. Our Commonwealth leaders have the opportunity to change the lives of millions of girls and the future of their countries.

Whether a girl has never stepped foot in a classroom or is prepping for her A-levels, young women around the world know the power of an education. They want a future filled with possibilities. I hope at the forthcoming Commonwealth summit, leaders’ actions will match girls’ ambition.

“I wish words were enough to secure the 129 million out-of-school girls the education they deserve. But no op-ed, speech or signed document alone can solve this issue - trust me, I’ve tried.”

ABOVE: Malala joins girls in a classroom on a visit to Ethiopia, July 2019.
THE COMMONWEALTH REPRESENTING 54 NATIONS ACROSS SIX CONTINENTS, ONE-FIFTH OF GLOBAL TRADE AND ONE-THIRD OF THE WORLD’S POPULATION.