

**Africa Programme
Transcript**

Africa and the Commonwealth

**A vision for a responsive and fortified
Commonwealth**

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Dr Vines, thank you for this gracious introduction and for this valuable opportunity to share my reflections on how to fortify the Commonwealth and to make it more responsive to the needs of its member states and impact their policies on key global challenges.

Excellencies, Esteemed Chatham House Members,

Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We cannot reflect on how a responsive and fortified Commonwealth can impact policies on the challenges Commonwealth members face without recalling and acknowledging the important contribution of this voluntary association that today consists of 56 equal and independent countries with the convening power to effect global change.

From galvanising international action against the apartheid regime in South Africa which began with pressure from Commonwealth member states in 1961, to the launch of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation in the early 1970s that serves as a fund for multilateral development assistance, the Commonwealth has provided invaluable support to its members.

Today, the international community is seized with global efforts to address the climate change crisis.

However, we should recall that it was the groundbreaking 1989 Commonwealth Holdgate Report on climate change that served as a pivotal moment, alerting the world to the impending global climate catastrophe.

By highlighting the catastrophic effects of climate change and the subsequent rise in sea levels, the report gave the world a ‘wakeup call’.

35 years later, we are witnessing the very outcomes projected in that report that the world’s poor would be the main victims of climate change.

The landmark Harare Declaration showcased a new order of the modern Commonwealth in 1991 when the then 50 member states affirmed the Commonwealth prioritisation of human rights, which included equal rights and opportunities for all citizens regardless of race, religion, colour, creed, or political belief; and restated the Commonwealth’s support for equality for women, universal access to education and environmental protection.

21st century member states still benefit from these commitments through the convening power of the Commonwealth, the quiet and preventive diplomatic work of the Good Offices of the Secretary-General and the programmatic work of the Commonwealth Secretariat which I have had the privilege to serve for just over 12 months.

However, my experience of the Commonwealth did not start over a year ago when I joined the Secretariat as a Senior Director and Secretary to the Board of Governors.

It started 32 years ago when, as a young Foreign Ministry officer in Lesotho - a small landlocked country in Southern Africa, I had the privilege of witnessing the transformative impact of the Commonwealth.

I also saw firsthand the invaluable assistance provided by the Commonwealth towards building democratic institutions and strengthening electoral processes when it supported the transformation of Lesotho's electoral system.

Later, as a Lesotho diplomat at the World Trade Organization in 1998, I had the privilege of drafting the first proposal calling for the recognition of the vulnerabilities of 41 developing countries, 33 of which were Commonwealth members. This proposal laid the foundation for the creation of a new category of countries in multilateral trade agreements that is today known as the SVEs (Small and Vulnerable Economies), highlighting the Commonwealth's ability to effect meaningful change.

Similarly, during my tenure at the World Trade Organization, I led the collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat that delivered trade-related technical assistance to developing member states, empowering them to participate effectively in the global economy within the context of the Doha Development Round negotiations.

A few years later, in my capacity as Minister for Trade and Industry, I benefitted from the Commonwealth Hubs and Spokes program, which seconded a technical expert to my Ministry. And most recently, as Managing Director of the UN Technology Bank for Least Developed Countries, I signed a cooperation agreement with the current Secretary-General, the Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland, KC, to support Commonwealth least developed countries to undertake Technology Needs Assessments and enhance their innovation ecosystems.

These experiences shaped my belief in the Commonwealth as an organisation with an unwavering commitment to the advancement of its members.

Chair, the future of the Commonwealth is anchored in the continued political will of its member states. However, its effectiveness is intricately intertwined with its capacity to champion and be responsive to the priorities of its member states during this era of polycrisis.

The resurgence of interstate and intra-state conflicts globally has challenged the resilience of the multilateral system, particularly those efforts dedicated to conflict resolution.

We cannot underestimate the dire consequences of enduring conflict zones, from Ukraine to the Red Sea and the resurgent activities of extremist groups across the African continent.

These geopolitical instabilities have compromised human security, disrupted vital trade routes and spiralled into economic hardship, exacerbating the cost of living. Moreover, global energy and food security have been called into question as nations scramble for alternative sources.

Notably, these challenges impact not just one Commonwealth region but span all five.

Compounding these crises, we witness the profound impact of climate change on our planet, manifesting through increasingly erratic and extreme weather patterns. This climate crisis has claimed lives, disrupted livelihoods, depleted natural resources, and strained natural resource dependent economies. It has also exacerbated the migration crisis, changing displacement patterns and contributing to conflicts and particularly displacing indigenous communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic further weakened Commonwealth members, and as measures to curb its spread heavily impacted the services sector, particularly small and medium enterprises, it disrupted critical supply chains and precipitated a debt crisis.

As a consequence of all this, the Commonwealth and the world now faces the increasing threat of nationalism and a shift towards inward-looking policies.

The Official Development Assistance envelope has dwindled, leaving vulnerable communities exposed and hindering resilience-building efforts and threatening to reverse the progress that had been made towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. These challenges have also prompted a collective demand, driven primarily by developing countries, for a reform of the global financial architecture which prioritises an equitable financial system to alleviate poverty and ease the debt burden on states.

Notwithstanding the perils of exclusionary politics, the reliance on multilateralism is now even more evident. Despite continuing criticism of the effectiveness of the global governance system, member states have continued to call on and work within the multilateral system. The UN Security Council, for example, held over 290 consultations each year from 2020, a clear indication that, even with its flaws, multilateralism is still a global necessity.

Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that more multilateral forums have emerged, and existing ones are expanding their membership and scope. For example, the G20 has evolved into G20+3, with the African Union now a full member; BRICS now boasts 10 members, with another 40 expressing interest to join, a significant increase from its founding 5 members; the EU and NATO are also expanding in light of the Ukraine crisis, and closer to home, the Commonwealth has welcomed Togo and Gabon in the past 2 years, with several other countries expressing interest to join.

So, as you can see, the impetus for global order and the utility of multilateral cooperation mechanisms remains unchallenged despite the threat of global fragmentation. Hence, the Commonwealth's relevance is sustained through the continued commitment to its principles by Commonwealth members.

With this background in mind, I see several opportunities and areas where the commonwealth can provide thought leadership and deliver transformative

impact among its members, particularly the small developing states which are more vulnerable.

First is in the area of trade and investment.

Drawing from my experience as Minister of Trade and Industry; as well as having served in a senior position at the WTO, I consider the transformative power of trade and investment to be of paramount importance in shaping the future of our collective prosperity.

To illustrate, let me offer the following; As of 2022, intra-Commonwealth trade had reached \$565.4 billion, with the primary sectors engaged including energy, manufacturing, minerals, apparel and clothing, vehicles, plastics, and pharmaceuticals. The export-to-import ratio data indicates that Commonwealth countries procure 15% of their total imports from fellow member states, while their exports to other Commonwealth countries make up 16% of their total exports. This data underscores a significant potential for growth, suggesting an opportunity to enhance trade relations and increase the share of intra-Commonwealth trade.

This potential offers an immense opportunity for a pathway to economic growth and poverty alleviation for millions of our Commonwealth citizens, which I propose can be achieved through the following strategies;

The first strategy is to increase intra-Commonwealth trade and investment. This strategy will be underpinned by enhancing trade finance liquidity and focusing particularly on micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and equipping them with the capacity to trade.

The second strategy is to build the capacity for implementation of regional trade through enhanced cooperation with regional economic communities to deliver on their regional trade priorities.

The African Continental Free Trade Agreement initiative is one such opportunity that should benefit from our collective support.

And just to be clear Chair, I am not in any way suggesting that we immediately launch a Commonwealth wide trade agreement negotiation. It takes on average 10 years to conclude a plurilateral trade agreement and frankly, I do not think there is any political appetite for that.

What I am proposing is to build on the success of past Commonwealth trade initiatives including the Hub and Spokes and the connectivity agenda and focus our resources on strengthening the capacity to trade across the commonwealth. This should be focussed on equipping SMEs, with the tools to trade across commonwealth markets and strengthening the private sector to play its part. We should also focus on creating opportunities for private capital and liquidity to fully unlock this trade potential.

As Secretary-General, I will also prioritise mobilising significant support towards improving the investment climate across the commonwealth and advocating for investor friendly policy reform.

The second area of priority is to continue working across the membership to support the fight against the destructive impact of climate change and continue to advocate for investments in resilience and adaptation.

The impact of climate change today is far-reaching and poses the most significant challenge to the socio-economic, political and security priorities of our member states.

Regrettably, Africa, contributes less than 4%, the Pacific less than 1%, and the Caribbean less than 0.3% of global greenhouse emissions. Yet, these regions are the most disproportionately impacted by climate change.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) stand as particularly vulnerable, facing the stark threat of rising sea levels and coastal extremes. The UN recognises 38 member states as SIDS. 25 of these, which equate to 66%, are members of the Commonwealth.

From 1998 to 2017 alone, the 10 countries in the world most affected by disasters in terms of economic loss as a percentage of GDP were in the Caribbean. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that the sea level rise will intensify in the next three decades, raising severe legal implications for SIDS, potentially jeopardising their territorial rights, resource access, and the displacement of their populations.

Chair, in the face of this grave outlook, we find solace in the global commitments made to reduce emissions and fund adaptation and mitigation measures, including the most recent adoption of the loss and damage fund. However, the severity of the risks we confront demands a redoubling of our efforts.

Under my leadership, the Commonwealth Secretariat will steadfastly advocate for increased climate finance for adaptation and mitigation.

I should also take this opportunity to commend the Secretary-General and the Secretariat for their pioneering work through the Climate Finance Access Hub initiative, which has mobilised more than \$50 million in 12 small and vulnerable states to date.

To conclude on this important issue, I wish to note that the move to clean energy is linked to the well-being of our planet; however, this transition must adhere to principles of equity, inclusivity and sustainability. We must not only aim to reduce emissions, but also provide affordable, sustainable energy security, while leveraging critical minerals responsibly. The transition therefore needs to be looked at from a market lens. Data indicates that green trade has tripled since 2019 to \$1.9 trillion, if well managed, this is a market opportunity for our member states.

Our member states have already charted the political course for this endeavour through initiatives such as the Bridgetown Initiative and the Nairobi Declaration, and for its part, the Commonwealth Secretariat should redouble its collaboration with the UN, the World Trade Organisation and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), to advocate for global carbon markets and trading policies.

Third priority area is Support for our core values and principles.

Today we live in one of the most critical times in the history of global democracy. In 2024, billions worldwide will exercise their right to elect leaders who will shape their future. An exercise of rights, a right to representation and a right to choose one's representation in an equitable, just, free and fair process.

While these processes are underway, democracy, the bedrock of our Commonwealth, faces unprecedented challenges.

For example, in West Africa, unconstitutional power seizures and the erosion of electoral integrity have become commonplace and threaten to spill over into the Commonwealth. Justice is torn by political interference, undermining the fundamental Commonwealth value of 'rule of law'.

The investment made over the past few decades in strengthening democracy in the Commonwealth is under threat and unless an urgent effort is launched to shore up these critical institutions, the progress achieved to date will be unravelled.

As a values-based organisation, the Commonwealth must reaffirm its unwavering commitment to democracy, good governance, human rights, and the rule of law.

These values and principles are the very foundation of our Commonwealth. It is through the protection of these principles that we ensure the well-being of our citizens.

I pledge that, under my leadership, the Commonwealth Secretariat will redouble its efforts to strengthen the resilience of our democratic institutions. We will work hand in hand with member states to prevent the reversal of hard-won democratic gains and to foster a vibrant and inclusive society where freedom, justice, and self-determination prevail. In the words of Chief Emeka Anyaoku, "democracy and development are two sides of the same coin."

Chair, I trust that if we align our efforts around these priorities, we can navigate our way more effectively in this era of polycrisis, support our member states, and amplify the Commonwealth's voice on the global stage.

Chair, I have saved the best for last, and I beg for your indulgence.

To achieve all the above, I propose to work hand in hand with the Board of Governors to urgently drive the reform agenda already underway in the

Informal Working Groups established by our Board Chair, HE Linda Scott, High Commissioner of the Republic of Namibia. This is an urgent agenda that will focus on a number of key areas which are very critical. As a priority, this agenda should address the following.

First, a reinvestment in and strengthening of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Secretariat's effectiveness in delivering support to member states is paramount to the success of the Commonwealth mission of delivering for its citizens and a key part of this is funding.

With over 25 years of experience in multilateral diplomacy, I will lead the secretariat to urgently undertake an exercise to identify and propose to members, options for a well consulted and curated funding model that is fit for purpose for the organisation of the future.

The reality is that the current voluntary funding mechanism is volatile and poses a risk to the effectiveness of the Secretariat.

Second, in this challenging environment of global critique of foreign aid, the Commonwealth must be more forthcoming, more agile but also more transparent in its dealings at all levels. I believe that transparency in delivery is absolutely critical to engender clarity, trust and accountability. Without trust, there is no relationship, and the relationship between the Secretariat and the Board of Governors is the most critical in my view. Transparency in goal setting, transparency in negotiations, transparency in results and challenges all enhance the opportunity to collaborate and build upwards.

Third, just like all multilaterals, one of the biggest challenges facing the Commonwealth Secretariat is that the needs are many and the national development agendas are divergent. A discussion among members on the best approaches to prioritisation is important and urgent. For its part, the Secretariat under my leadership will provide frameworks on how this exercise can be undertaken while at the same time maintaining a firm commitment to the CHOGM mandates.

The hard truth is that the Commonwealth cannot and must not try to be all things to all people. It must recognise its comparative advantage, embrace its core strengths and lead on those.

Fourth, one of the most prevalent questions that has come up in my consultations to date has been, 'but what are we getting from the Commonwealth?'

Multilaterals like the Commonwealth have a much bigger job to prove their continued relevance, we must continue to strive to be responsive with the ability to bring people, resources, technical knowhow and capacities together with governments to design solutions to common problems.

The fifth and last key element of this reform action agenda is the importance of harnessing the potential of partnerships. If we are to amplify our work, we must perfect the art of delivering through others.

The Commonwealth boasts a rich tapestry of diverse partnerships with its member states, international organisations, regional organisations, Commonwealth accredited organisations and as well as the private sector, which includes philanthropic organisations. However, the most critical is the Secretariat's partnership with the member states as they are the ones that inform our priorities.

To enhance this partnership, I will ensure that the Secretariat leverages on the collective wisdom of our member states to foster transparent and participatory decision-making.

Chair, my vision of a responsive and fortified Commonwealth will be incomplete if I don't highlight the centrality of technology and innovation to the work of the Secretariat and the Commonwealth as a whole.

I will work tirelessly to address what I consider to be the key challenges facing Commonwealth developing countries in this area. These challenges include mobilising resources to bridge the widening digital gap between them and the rest of the world.

Furthermore, building qualitative human capital with the requisite digital skills is equally important if we are to engage with the rest of the world in the discussions on AI and its implications for our future. This is where I see the strength of the Commonwealth on this topic, and we have adequate capacity and knowledge across the Commonwealth to exchange experiences and lessons and our role will be to facilitate these exchanges.

Chair, I conclude by noting that in many ways, the Commonwealth is still a catalyst of progress for our member states and that if we harness the collective wisdom and resources of our Commonwealth, steadfast in the guiding light of our Charter, we can fortify our Commonwealth by confronting – not avoiding – our realities, to shape a future that is brighter, more prosperous, and more just, for all Commonwealth citizens.

I thank you.