

Statement by the Commonwealth Secretary-General

Rt Hon Don McKinnon

on the occasion of the

**High Level Plenary Meeting of the
United Nations General Assembly**

New York, 16 September 2005

Mr President,

I was privileged to speak in this Hall five years ago when world leaders agreed the Millennium Declaration – a vision for a fairer, safer, and more prosperous world. I am honoured to speak again today on the same subject and, once again, on behalf of the 53 nations of the Commonwealth.

One third of the Commonwealth's 1.8 billion people live on less than one dollar a day. Almost two thirds of the world's HIV/AIDS cases and maternal deaths take place in Commonwealth countries. More than half of the world's 115 million children without education are to be found in the Commonwealth.

That is why the Commonwealth not only has an interest in achieving the MDGs but also a responsibility to do so.

One of the great things about meeting here in New York City is that we see what can be achieved through prosperity and technological advances: going into space; sending information, pictures, and even money around the world in milliseconds; finding cures for age-old maladies.

By being here in New York or in many other dynamic cities around the world, we can also glimpse over the horizon what growth and prosperity could offer in future.

But contrast that with what we also see in many countries day after day. We see children who we know will never see the inside of a classroom; young and old people who will die of dysentery, malaria, tuberculosis and other curable diseases. For most, drinking water is a diminishing resource that is either unaffordable or simply unavailable. We see people condemned to inferiority because of their gender or religion or colour of their skin, or simply because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

You have heard many of the statistics over the last three days. The picture is a sombre one and we are all affected. I have listened carefully to many speakers,

as we have together sought to question and answer why we have not done better in achieving those eight Millennium Development Goals.

Our limited success in achieving the MDGs after five years should, above all, shock into action those of us here who can do more. Those with the means must be more committed and more generous to those in the statistical spotlight.

This year, G8 countries have pledged increased aid and also debt cancellation for low income countries. I applaud those initiatives. That is the sort of concrete action required. It was of a level of ambition and scale that needs to be repeated again and again until the MDGs are securely and sustainably achieved. And when I say the MDGs, I mean the Goals themselves and not just the targets. We need, for example, to go beyond the target of halving income poverty and reach the Goal – that is, the total eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. The test on those pledges, as always, is ‘delivery, delivery, delivery’, and to ensure that the funds made available are spent with wisdom, responsibility, accountability, and effectiveness.

In the Commonwealth, 11 of our 53 members have recorded significant progress on the MDGs already, but 31 have made slow progress, and some are actually going backwards. The Commonwealth will have to redouble its efforts to achieve the MDGs and we will do so.

We will help to build or rebuild those democratic institutions which we know go hand-in-hand with stable and prosperous societies. We will continue to champion the principles and values our membership holds dear, including fundamental human rights.

We will continue to emphasise the importance of gender issues in advancing towards fair and sustainable development, especially promoting gender balance in the development and execution of public policy.

We will continue to use our extensive and effective civil society networks in partnership with governments and other official organs – that is the Commonwealth way.

We will also continue to stand up for small states which too often find themselves at the margins of global debate and on the receiving rather than participating end of decisions.

We will continue to work relentlessly to see countries get a better deal in international trade, so that people everywhere can invest with confidence, produce with enthusiasm, and sell freely in a fair market. Following the statement by President Bush in this Hall a few days ago on subsidies and tariffs, I look forward to a positive result at the WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong in December.

Mr President,

This year marks 60 years of the United Nations. This institution embodies mankind's collective will to live and progress together, in a collaborative way, in a community of nations. Multilateralism is the only way in which common problems can be resolved in a substantive way and the future secured for all. Global challenges require global responses.

My colleague, Secretary-General Kofi Annan, has placed before governments a wide-ranging series of proposals to move forward the UN as an institution, and the priority global issues with which it deals. I welcome especially the proposed strengthening of the UN's work in peace-building, human rights, anti-terrorism, and the special attention to development and democracy. The UN has been and will remain a vital partner for the Commonwealth in furthering our objectives in democratisation, peace, human rights and development.

Development can no longer be thought of simply in terms of GDP. Development is about possibilities first and production second. It is about touching the lives of everyone.

Democracy, too, is about expanding opportunities and strengthening human capabilities. Only if democracy and development live in the hearts of the people of a country and have real meaning for them will that country's institutions work as they should and will sustainable prosperity be realised.

Mr President,

It is not too late to achieve the MDGs by 2015 with the requisite will, partnerships and resources. The political will was there in 2000, and there is therefore no excuse not to recommit to them this week, to make the necessary pledges and to say, "We will do it." The Commonwealth will continue to play its part.

Thank you.