



The Commonwealth

A briefing for journalists | January 2023

# Fast Facts: The Commonwealth

## Overview

The Commonwealth is made up of 56 **independent** countries that work together to pursue common goals which promote **development, democracy and peace**. Our combined population is 2.5 billion, of which more than **60 per cent** is aged 29 or under.

The Commonwealth **spans the globe** and includes both advanced economies and developing countries. It encompasses Africa (21 countries), Asia (8), the Caribbean and Americas (13), Europe (3), and the Pacific (11).

The Commonwealth's strength lies in its shared values and **diversity**. Thirty-three of our members are small states, usually with a population well under 1.5 million, and 25 members are small island developing states.

The Pacific nation of Nauru is the **smallest** Commonwealth member country with a population of just over 12,000. The **most populous** member country is India with over 1.4 billion people.

## Our organisations

The Commonwealth is connected by an active network of more than 80 intergovernmental, civil society and professional organisations, including:

- The [Commonwealth Secretariat](#) - supporting member states
- The [Commonwealth Foundation](#) - supporting civil society
- The [Commonwealth of Learning](#) - promoting distance learning and education
- The [Commonwealth Games Federation](#) - promoting sports development

[See the full list of accredited organisations.](#)

## Headline facts

The Commonwealth's population is **2.5 billion**, of which more than **60 per cent** is aged 29 or under.

**Worldwide, one in three young people** aged between 15 and 29 live in Commonwealth countries.<sup>1</sup>

The Commonwealth has observed over **160 elections in over 40 countries** since 1991.

The combined GDP of Commonwealth countries in 2021 was US\$13.1 trillion and is estimated to reach **\$19.5 trillion in 2027**, almost doubling in ten years from \$10.4 trillion in 2017.<sup>2</sup>

Bilateral costs for **trading** partners in Commonwealth countries are on average **19 per cent** less than between those in non-member countries. A real Commonwealth Advantage.<sup>3</sup>

Half of the top 20 global **emerging cities** are in the Commonwealth: New Delhi, Mumbai, Nairobi, Kuala Lumpur, Bangalore, Johannesburg, Kolkata, Cape Town, Chennai and Dhaka.<sup>4</sup>

Many small and developing Commonwealth countries are among those with the **lowest ecological footprints** worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

Commonwealth countries are among the highest performing in the **Ibrahim Index of African Governance** and make up 7 of the top 10 nations.<sup>6</sup>

In Sub-Saharan Africa, Commonwealth countries make up 7 of the top 10 highest performing countries for **gender equality**.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [2020 Global Youth Development Index](#)

<sup>2</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat calculations using [International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Commonwealth Trade Review 2021](#)

<sup>4</sup> Cities in low- and middle- income countries predicted to become global leaders in terms of business activity, human capital and innovation in 10-20 years [AT Kearney Emerging Cities Outlook 2014](#)

<sup>5</sup> Bangladesh, Rwanda, Pakistan, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, India, Kenya, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Tanzania in top 30 for lowest footprint per capita WWF - [Happy Planet Index](#)

<sup>6</sup> The Commonwealth scores 60.0 next to an average Africa score of 50.0. Top ranked Commonwealth countries are Mauritius, Botswana, Seychelles, Namibia, South Africa, Ghana and Rwanda [Ibrahim Index of African Governance 2017](#)

<sup>7</sup> Rwanda, Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Botswana and Lesotho [Global Gender Gap Report 2017](#)



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## Our values

### History and membership

The modern Commonwealth was formed on **26 April 1949** when the leaders of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom adopted the [London Declaration](#). The declaration defined the Commonwealth as a “free association” of independent member countries.

All members have an **equal say**, regardless of their size or economic stature. This ensures that even the smallest countries have a voice in shaping the Commonwealth. In the past two decades, countries which have joined include **Rwanda, the Gambia and Maldives**.

The last two countries to join the Commonwealth were **Gabon and Togo** in June 2022.

### Commonwealth Charter

The Commonwealth’s principles and values have been agreed over the years by our Heads of Government and articulated in communiqués such as the *Harare Declaration* and the *Singapore Declaration*.

On 14 December 2012, leaders agreed the [Commonwealth Charter](#) which sets out 16 core shared principles to which all member countries have committed. The charter covers:

- Article 1. Democracy*
- Article 2. Human Rights*
- Article 3. International Peace and Security*
- Article 4. Tolerance, Respect and Understanding*
- Article 5. Freedom of Expression*
- Article 6. Separation of Powers*
- Article 7. Rule of Law*
- Article 8. Good Governance*
- Article 9. Sustainable Development*
- Article 10. Protecting the Environment*
- Article 11. Health, Education, Food and Shelter*
- Article 12. Gender Equality*
- Article 13. Young People in the Commonwealth*
- Article 14. The Needs of Small States*
- Article 15. The Needs of Vulnerable States*
- Article 16. The Role of Civil Society*

### We the People of the Commonwealth

“Recognising that in an era of changing economic circumstances and uncertainty, new trade and economic patterns, unprecedented threats to peace and security, and a surge in popular demands for democracy, human rights and broadened economic opportunities, the potential of and need for the Commonwealth - as a compelling force for good and as an effective network for co-operation and for promoting development - has never been greater.”

[Read the Commonwealth Charter.](#)

### Commonwealth Day

Commonwealth Day is celebrated by young people, schools, communities and civil society organisations on the **second Monday in March** every year. It is an opportunity to promote understanding on Commonwealth values.

### Towards a Common Future

The theme for the [2022 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting](#) (CHOGM) was ‘[Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming.](#)’

This theme highlights how the [56 member countries](#) in the Commonwealth family are ‘innovating, connecting and transforming’ to help achieve some of its biggest goals.

It was chosen because Commonwealth countries are connected by deep-rooted networks of friendship and goodwill.



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## Our structure

### Head of the Commonwealth

The Head of the Commonwealth is His Majesty King Charles III. The role:

- is an important symbolic one
- has no maximum fixed term
- is not hereditary, and future Heads will be chosen by Commonwealth leaders.

On 8 September 2022, the Royal Family announced the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Her Majesty The Queen's 96 years were marked by her 70 years of service to the Crown and Commonwealth.

### Commonwealth Secretary-General

The Commonwealth Secretary-General promotes and protects the Commonwealth's fundamental values, represents the Commonwealth globally, and manages the Commonwealth Secretariat. She or he is appointed by leaders and can serve a maximum of two four-year terms.

[The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC](#) is the 6th Commonwealth Secretary-General. She was born in Dominica and was their candidate for the post at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Malta in 2015.

### The Commonwealth Secretariat

The Commonwealth Secretariat works with governments to deliver on priorities agreed by Commonwealth Heads of Government. We bring policymakers together and provide guidance and technical assistance to member countries.

Based at Marlborough House in London, the Secretariat is staffed by professionals from across the Commonwealth. Our programme work encompasses areas such as democracy, rule of law, human rights, governance, economic and social development, small states and youth development.

The Commonwealth Secretariat, alongside the Secretary-General, represents the interests of member countries, especially small and developing states who can sometimes be overshadowed by larger, more powerful countries.

### Heads of Government summit

Every two years, the leaders of our 56 countries gather for the [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting](#) (CHOGM). A major global event, this intergovernmental summit is an opportunity for Heads to address shared challenges and set new priorities. Decisions are reached by consensus with statements reflecting the views of all those present.

Responsibility for hosting the summit is shared by member countries. The next Heads of Government Meeting will be hosted by Samoa in 2024. Past meetings were held in Rwanda (2022), United Kingdom (2018), Malta (2015), Sri Lanka (2013), Australia (2011) and Trinidad and Tobago (2009).

### Ministerial meetings

Government ministers responsible for foreign affairs, finance, law, youth development, women's affairs, health and education meet regularly to discuss issues of shared concern and agree areas for action.

Policy priorities agreed at Commonwealth meetings will typically be promoted by member governments at other international forums and intergovernmental organisations, such as the African Union and the Caribbean Community.

### Ministerial Action Group

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group deals with serious or persistent violations of the Commonwealth's shared principles. It is made up of a rotating group of foreign ministers from nine countries.

The Group engages proactively and constructively with countries where Commonwealth values are at risk. It meets to assess the nature of any contraventions and works with countries to agree on a course of action to restore democracy and constitutional rule. Suspension is one of the actions that can be taken by the Group. This means that a country is prevented from taking part in Commonwealth activities and it will no longer be eligible for technical assistance. No country has ever been expelled from the Commonwealth.