

Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting

Time: 0945 - 0955 hrs

Secretary-General's Remarks to the 2023 Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting

Excellencies and Honourable Ministers

Distinguished Guests

Commonwealth Friends and Colleagues

I warmly welcome you to Marlborough House on
this beautiful spring day.

As we continue to advance the wishes of Commonwealth Leaders, I place on record our collective gratitude to President Paul Kagame, and the Government of Rwanda, for their continued leadership and dedication as our Chair-in-Office.

And I welcome the Honourable Minister, Dr. Jean Chrysostome Ngabitsinze, to the Chair for this second meeting of Commonwealth Trade Ministers.

Honourable Ministers, **we are here** with the mandate of our Heads of Government, who welcomed the revitalized collaboration among Commonwealth Trade Ministers at CHOGM last

year, and resolved that this group should convene *at this time and in this place* to discuss how we can move forward together from the World Trade Organization's 12th Ministerial Conference.

We are here because - as a family joined by values, interests and practical advantages - trade is one of the most important things we share.

We are here because we share a common vision: to achieve US\$2 trillion in intra-Commonwealth trade by 2030.

And following two meetings of Senior Trade Officials, a gathering of our Caucus of Ambassadors

to the WTO in Geneva, and the outstanding preparatory work done by our superb Trade Team here at the Secretariat, we can say with all confidence that **we are ready to get down to business.**

We gather in a time of change and challenge.

All of us are tightly bound by a tangled knot of crises spanning global systems:

A world living with the social, political and economic consequences of COVID-19.

A world of crippling debt, rising inflation and high interest rates.

Of spiralling costs for food and energy.

We are grappling with the tremors of instability and conflict.

And all the time, we are buffeted by the increasingly harsh impacts of climate change.

In isolation, each of these challenges are grave and serious.

But they interconnect, entwine and worsen one another, threatening our collective well-being.

As we stand at the mid-point of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, these crises underscore the urgency with which we need to enhance our collaboration and strengthen our partnerships to build a fairer, more resilient, more prosperous and sustainable world, and the get the SDGs back on track.

The importance of trade and investment in achieving this is *beyond question*.

And be in no doubt about what we can achieve when we work together.

You - the Ministers gathered around this table - are in a unique position to unleash the benefits of trade and investment for one third of humanity.

By working together - with action shaped by our values, informed by our shared interests and seizing our shared advantage - we can achieve something special:

Unleashing economic benefits for our all our member states: increasing market access, trade volumes and growth opportunities.

Improving trade facilitation: reducing barriers and streamlining processes, enhancing efficiency,

reducing costs, and encouraging cross-border investment.

Improving development and building capacity:

assisting Commonwealth member states to enhance trade capabilities - through training, knowledge sharing, strengthening policy and institutions, and improving infrastructure.

Fostering connections between people:

creating opportunities for collaboration, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding; deepening our ties, building trust, encouraging tourism, strengthening diplomatic relations, and promoting peace.

And enhancing our collective advocacy for global reform: coordinating our positions and leveraging our partnerships to amplify the voices of all Commonwealth countries - especially the most vulnerable - to shape more equitable and inclusive global trade rules.

When I became Secretary-General in 2016, I promised to put the “*Wealth*” back into Commonwealth, and the “*Common*” back into Wealth.

Today, I am delighted to be able to share with you all what our collective wealth really is.

We have examined the World Bank's "Changing Wealth of Nations" database to calculate the value of the combined stocks of **physical infrastructure, natural capital, and human capital** across all our member countries.

The findings are remarkable.

Using this multidimensional measure, we have found that the combined wealth of our Commonwealth members is approximately **150 trillion US dollars**.

This is **10 times** greater than your combined GDP.

And **30 times** more significant than your global trade in goods and services.

Two-thirds of these assets are in the form of **human capital**, reflecting the wealth of skills, talent, and ingenuity of our 2.5 billion people, 60 per cent of whom are under the age of 30.

This is the most important form of capital in the digital and information age, and we are working together to build an inclusive digital transition to harness this capital effectively.

Our members are also endowed with abundant **natural wealth**, including tropical forests, arable

lands, freshwater ecosystems and coastlines; and we are taking proactive steps to conserve these natural assets through our Blue Charter and Living Lands Charter.

These combined assets illustrate the potential for growth in our Commonwealth.

However, though our collective wealth is substantial, the picture is not painted equally.

The varying degree of economic development within our Commonwealth Family is a central challenge.

To overcome this challenge, we must continue to harness the profound trade and investment advantages of Commonwealth membership.

We have powerful practical benefits: in language, common law, regulatory coherence, business procedures, and large and dynamic diaspora communities.

Our ability to leverage these benefits means that, although the Commonwealth is not a formal trading bloc, trade costs between Commonwealth countries are **21 per cent** lower, on average, compared to trading with non-Commonwealth members.

And our trade is remarkably resilient. Intra-Commonwealth exports have made a stellar recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2021, these exports reached an all-time high of **721 billion** dollars, up by nearly **140 billion** dollars from the previous year.

We estimate that these exports surpassed **800 billion** dollars in 2022, and we project that they will exceed **1 trillion** dollars by 2026.

In your folder, you will find an information sheet outlining the trade, investment, wealth and digital profile of each of our member countries for your ease of reference.

This advantage is not accidental - it exists because of our collective commitment to leverage our strengths.

But to ensure it is felt equally across the five continents and six oceans of our Commonwealth, we must continue to deepen our cooperation and partnership, and seize the opportunities before us.

The Commonwealth Secretariat is working relentlessly to support you all in this endeavour:

- Through our Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda.

- Through the support we provide to member countries on trade policies and export competitiveness.
- Through the work of the Trade Adviser project at the Commonwealth Small States Office in Geneva, which is generously funded by the United Kingdom, and I invite other member countries to contribute towards this project to ensure its expansion.
- Through our support for the private sector, in practical initiatives such as the Intra-Commonwealth SME Association, the

Commonwealth Alliance of Young Entrepreneurs, our Small States Trade Finance Facility, and the Business Forum at CHOGM.

- Through special partnerships with the International Trade Centre, the Enhanced Integrated Framework for Least Developed Countries, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and the World Trade Organization.

And may I saw how honoured we are to have the Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Mr Pedro Moreno with us today, and the Director-General of the WTO, Dr Ngozi

Okonjo-Iweala, who will join us this afternoon.

- Through opportunities such as the Commonwealth Games, hosted in Birmingham last year and scheduled for Victoria in 2026, which makes an enormous contribution to strengthening our economic, social and cultural bonds.
- And through collaborations with a range of our accredited organisations to promote the Commonwealth's trade agenda, especially through local economic development, youth

entrepreneurship and women's economic empowerment.

This is the second meeting of Commonwealth Trade Ministers. The first was in 2019.

The world has changed dramatically since then - and it continues to change.

Not only because of the challenges I have mentioned, but because of deepening digitalisation and the advent of new frontier technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, big data, blockchain, cloud computing, and the internet of things.

These technologies have become critical to nearly every sector.

They are driving profound changes in our daily lives: in how we consume, produce and work; how societies connect, and how businesses are run.

The debate about the implications of these technologies is raging, but by the end of this decade they will have completely transformed our societies and our economies.

That is inevitable, not negotiable: so I am clear that we must work together not simply to navigate this change, **but to ensure that the**

Commonwealth Trade Agenda is shaped to turn change into advantage:

Equipping our young people with the capabilities they need, not just to survive in a technological revolution, but to thrive in it. Especially through our partnership with Simplilearn, which will see tens of thousands of young people across the Commonwealth trained in digital skills.

Ensuring that our governments and public institutions, have the knowledge and confidence to deploy technological developments to improve public policy and services - especially through

training we are delivering in partnership with Intel.

Driving positive change in healthcare; in education; in transport & infrastructure.

Developing and deploying new technologies - at scale - to achieve carbon neutrality and avoid the worst affects of climate change.

Harnessing digital trade to drive inclusive, sustainable, resilient growth - automating processes, integrating services, reducing bottlenecks, improving efficiency and increasing transparency.

And empowering the Commonwealth - especially our 33 Small States - to bridge the digital divide and unleash the full power of innovation and digitalization, through the new Commonwealth Small States Centre for Transformative Technologies and Artificial Intelligence, which we will deliver in partnership with Silicon Valley-based global firms, start-ups, universities and non-profits.

All of this work will cohere into the world's most dynamic and comprehensive political and economic framework for harnessing the best of

technological change, which we will put to Leaders at CHOGM next year: **delivering a Smart Commonwealth. A connected Commonwealth. An innovative, successful Commonwealth, with societies which are more equal, more fair, healthier, more prosperous and more secure.**

The next two days present us with a golden opportunity to work together in that timeless Commonwealth spirit of friendship and co-operation: to bring us closer to the promise of the future - through the combination of our shared vision, and the concrete steps we can take together:

- Renewing our commitment to a strong and effective rules-based multilateral trading system ahead of the WTO's 13th Ministerial Conference;
- Harnessing the transformative power of trade to enable food security, bridge the global digital divide, empower women in trade, support the sustainable energy transition, halt and reverse biodiversity loss in the ocean and on land, and manage the risks and challenges of climate change;

- And shaping bolder action achieve our shared goal of US\$2 trillion in intra-Commonwealth trade to by 2030.

What we agree together will be submitted to our Heads of Government ahead of the next CHOGM, in Samoa next October.

So let make the most of our opportunity, approaching our task with urgency and unity, in shared commitment to “deliver our common future”.

Thank you.