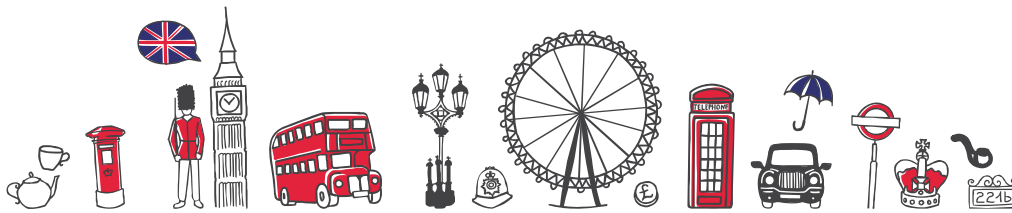


Recently, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) was held in London. Writer SHELLY FARR BISWELL reports on the Meeting's forums.



Zealand, has a well-earned reputation for being a team player. We provide funds and other support, such as technical expertise and a scholarship scheme, to help build capability in member countries.

Four forums

An important part of the conversation for all four forums was climate change. The issue was underscored by the fact that this CHOGM was meant to be held in Vanuatu in late 2017. Following the devastating impacts of Cyclone Pam on the small Pacific island nation, the meeting needed to be rescheduled and moved to London.

As Jamaica Prime Minister Andrew Holness noted during the joint forum session, for small island states, such as those in the Caribbean and the Pacific, the issue of climate change is not a “philosophical” one, but a very real “existential threat”. He said that funding for resilience, adaptation and education should not be treated as aid, but as an investment.

“We need to make an investment in the resilience of countries that are affected so that they can withstand, live through and recover quickly from these variable and extreme weather events...The truth is that the countries that suffer the most are the ones that least contribute to the issue of climate change.”

Changing the policy environment – the Women’s Forum

Young activist Zeleca Julien, Co-director of the Trinidad and Tobago community-based organisation I Am One, opened the Women's Forum with a powerful reminder of the challenges many women face, saying "There is nothing in this world more important to a young black woman than freedom. Black women have always had to prove themselves 100% more to get a fraction of basic human rights and respect...We are born fighting for freedom."

It's a troubling reality, as Tanya Barron, UK CEO of Plan International UK, wrote in the *CHOGM 2018 Report*. "Forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking are highly complex and context-specific phenomena. Whilst anyone can be forced, coerced or deceived into exploitative conditions, women and adolescent girls are disproportionately affected, accounting for 71 percent of people estimated to be forced into labour or marriage."

An important part of resolving this issue is ensuring there are more women in leadership roles. IPANZ President and Gender Consultant

When I arrived in London in January and told people I was hoping to go to CHOGM 2018, I received quizzical looks and polite nods. As one candid taxi driver told me, “I don’t think most people here think about the Commonwealth”. Still, as winter gave way to spring, interest in the Commonwealth grew, both in the media and in conversations on the street. At least part of that attentiveness can be traced to the UK’s need to strengthen alliances and seek new trading partners as it prepares to leave the European Union.

There may be more to it, however, as David Howell, President of The Royal Commonwealth Society, noted in the *CHOGM 2018 Report*: “The cyber age has drained and dispersed the power of governments, strengthened grassroots influence and given rise to forces, good and bad, which largely lie beyond the traditional interstate system of global affairs.”

“It is a supreme irony of our era that the modern Commonwealth of Nations – with its voluntary adherence, its loose coordination and its people-driven networks, orchestrated by no central agency or plan – is fast emerging as better equipped to adjust to these conditions than some international and multinational institutions of the past.”

A common understanding

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of countries across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Pacific. It's home to nearly one-third of the world's human population, of which over half are under the age of 30.

The Commonwealth Charter serves as the guiding document for the association and outlines core principles, such as mutual respect, inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability. A hallmark of the Commonwealth is that “size does not matter”, with all countries having an equal say. This is a notable feat, when one considers that the nations belonging to the Commonwealth range in size from Tuvalu (population under 10,000) to India (population over 1.25 billion).

One of the founding members of the modern Commonwealth, New

Forum recommendations

Recommendations from the Women's Forum and Youth Forum are outlined below and can be viewed online.

The recommendations from the Women's Forum has four overarching recommendations:

1. Accelerate actions to invest, implement and track progress of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
2. Create a taskforce of both male and female leaders from political, public and private sectors to champion gender equality, and to hold governments and businesses accountable on reaching the global target of 50% representation across all levels of decision-making.
3. Carry out a systemic review and repeal of discriminatory laws, and ensure that new laws undergo a gender impact assessment on women's rights and participation in leadership and economy.
4. Invest and increase technical and financial resources for data collection and analysis; research; knowledge creation and sharing; and capacity building for women's leadership, and implement measures to advance women's participation across sectors.

The Declaration and Action Plan by the Young People of the Commonwealth includes the following themes and key areas:

1. **A more prosperous future:** tackling youth employment; promotion of youth entrepreneurship and innovation; resourcing and financing youth development: leaving no one behind; and mainstreaming youth priorities in national development planning.
2. **A more secure future:** UN Security Council Resolution 2250 – Youth, Peace and Security; countering/preventing violent extremism; cyber security; global citizenship, and inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding.
3. **A more sustainable future:** youth leadership and participation in climate change policy; innovation and livelihoods in the blue and green economies; vulnerability and climate resilience; and sustaining use and management of energy and natural resources, including our oceans and tackling plastics.
4. **A fairer future:** inclusion and equity; health and well-being; enhancing the role of youth in democracy and governance; establishing and promotion of the economic, and social and cultural rights of young people.

To learn more about the forums, visit www.chogm2018.org.uk/forums. To see the Women's Forum recommendations, visit www.chogm2018.org.uk/womens-forum. To see the Youth Forum recommendations, visit www.chogm2018.org.uk/youth-forum.

Dr Jo Cribb facilitated a panel session on this central topic, with Rt Hon Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, as one of the panellists. Clark noted during the session that there is a need for parliamentarians to apply “a gender lens across all areas of policy and budgeting,” to determine whether policies are fair.



Helen Clark and Dr Jo Cribb (right).

Another session considered what needs to change within the policy environment to achieve gender equality. Dr Margo Thomas, international expert in private sector development and trade, identified four ways we can strengthen the current policy environment:

1. **Clarify for all stakeholders that women's economic empowerment is a win/win for everyone.** We have the evidence that when women are economically empowered there are benefits for everyone in society – there is greater potential for: social stability, inter-generational health and wellbeing benefits, economic growth and diversity, and equity in the distribution of wealth and income.
2. **Undertake a systemic review of policy, legal and regulatory frameworks.** The policy environment is dynamic. We may fix a certain law or address a policy issue today, but if we don't address the underlying systemic constraints, issues or legacy laws we are only providing a short-term fix.

As the *Women, Business and the Law 2018 Report* states, “Globally, over 2.7 billion women are legally restricted from having the same choice of jobs as men.” We need to undertake a systemic review of legal and regulatory frameworks, and strengthen the process by which new policies, laws and regulations are developed and implemented to make sure that they're more transparent, more inclusive, and that we consult with all constituents.
3. **Ensure once there's enactment of policy or legal changes, there are funds for implementation.** If we want change, we need to fund implementation. As part of this, we need greater accountability, implementation monitoring and systematic assessment of impact.
4. **Assure voice, representation and agency of women.** In the current political, economic and environmental landscape this is an all-hands-on-deck moment. This is not a task for just the public sector or the private sector. If we each start addressing these issues within our sphere, wherever we sit or stand, together we can make a difference.

Towards a common future

At the end of the three-day events, each forum provided a set of recommendations to the heads of government to consider (see box). These recommendations helped shape many of the decisions and discussions held over the remaining days of CHOGM.

The other outcome of the forums was a commitment from representatives to go back to their respective countries to share what they learned and to take action.

As keynote speaker entrepreneur and philanthropist Bill Gates noted during the joint forum session, progress isn't inevitable. “As long as we invest in young people they will innovate in ways we never could have imagined, and build a better life for themselves and their children, but that is not automatic. It depends on the actions that governments take and it depends on how effectively the Commonwealth forums organise and advocate,” he said.