

Commonwealth Electoral Network Biennial Conference Meeting

Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

22 June 2016

**Theme: “Advancing Commonwealth Principles in
Good Electoral Practice”**

Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General Dr Josephine Ojiambo

Opening Ceremony

- Mr Mark Ramkerrysingh, Chairperson, Elections and Boundaries Commission of Trinidad and Tobago, and incoming Chair of the CEN Steering Committee;
- Mr Ahmed Issack Hassan, Chairman of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission of Kenya and outgoing Chair of the CEN Steering Committee;
- Distinguished participants from election management bodies from across the Commonwealth;
- Our Junior Election Professionals alumni, Vincentia Laurent Adrien from Dominica, Dorcas Crentsil from Ghana, and Abdul Qayyum Khan from Pakistan;

- Representatives from Commonwealth High Commissions in Trinidad and Tobago;
- International partners;
- Ladies and Gentlemen;
- I am sure we are all delighted to be in Trinidad and Tobago, and it is my pleasure both to be a guest in this beautiful Commonwealth country as well as to welcome you to this Commonwealth gathering.
- I thank the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago and the Elections and Boundaries Commission for their warm welcome and hospitality, and their attention with the planning and delivery of our meeting. I also bring warm greetings from our Commonwealth Secretary-General, Right Honourable Patricia Scotland QC.
- Allow me to also thank Mr Ahmed Isaack Hassan for the dedication and commitment with which he has carried out his duties as Chair since the CEN Biennial Conference in Nairobi two years ago.
- It is most encouraging to see so many senior election officials here this evening, representing [37] of the Commonwealth's 53 member states, and international partners. Thank you all for coming from near or far.

- It is my hope that under the theme “Advancing Commonwealth Principles in Good Electoral Practice”, the agenda for this conference will offer a stimulating blend of opportunities for sharing not only practical experience and technical expertise, but also for collectively advancing Commonwealth principles and good electoral practices. It is my sincere hope that this meeting will mark another milestone in our efforts in enhancing our democratic culture and service to our citizens.

Commonwealth Values

- The values and aspirations for which the Commonwealth strives can be found in a single and defining document, the Commonwealth Charter.
- It recognises, and I quote, “the inalienable right of the individual to participate in democratic processes, in particular through free and fair elections, shaping the society in which they live.”
- Democracy itself - especially the institutions and processes that support it - is a work of constant evolution reflecting changing national circumstances over time. Lifting the quality and strengthening the relevance of our election management bodies is a continuing work-in-progress: all must strive to learn and apply the lessons from each new election and rise to the emergence of new challenges, as well as greater demands for transparency and integrity.

- This meeting is an opportunity to make a practical contribution to the very essence of what it is to live in a Commonwealth community. By learning and lifting the quality of what we do in the electoral sphere, the tide of democracy rises for all Commonwealth citizens.
- Our Commonwealth way is not about one-size-fits-all. We build at the national level on the values and principles we share at the global level. That is what Commonwealth meetings such as this are about: to strengthen networks, to exchange, and to be mutually supportive.

Sustainable Development Goals

- Last September, global agreement was reached on the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The Agenda defines the global development for the next 15 years. These are our Commonwealth priorities as well, and our collective work must therefore be directed towards the achievement of these goals.
- In the context of the CEN Biennial Conference, an important focus of the 2030 Agenda is inclusiveness in governance. Indeed, Sustainable Development Goal 16 speaks, among other issues, to the need to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development; promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and provide access to justice for all; and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”.

Commonwealth Elections

- In the Commonwealth, we are placing an increased focus on the quality of electoral processes and institutions. Secretary-General Scotland has made it a core pillar of her term in office to champion governance and our citizens' rights.
- Our election observation is one of our brand strengths: we have now sent more than 130 Observer Groups to elections since 1990.
- Our election observation work has benefitted from the presence of many Commonwealth experts. Some of you are here and I thank you, on behalf of the Secretary-General, for your contributions.
- As we continue to raise governance standards, we are conscious of the need to follow up the recommendations of our election observers. Their reports are intended to support your work, and we would therefore welcome your thoughts on how to make further progress in this regard.
- The Commonwealth Secretariat also manages a technical assistance programme from which some of your offices have benefitted. Please do make use of the time together over the next three days with our Electoral Support Section team to explore the options.

The Commonwealth Electoral Network

- The quality of a country's election is, to a large extent, dependent upon the quality of its election management body. This can make the crucial difference.
- It was with this in mind that we established the Commonwealth Electoral Network around five years ago - the CEN, bringing together national election management bodies in all our member states.
- Its aim is to support experience-sharing and to promote good practices, and to provide opportunities for collaboration.

Women's participation

- There are a number of anticipated outcomes from this meeting that are reflected in the rich agenda before us this week. But there is one in particular that I wish to highlight, which is close to my own heart, and that is to strengthen our understanding of the barriers to women's political participation.
- Our Charter recognises "that gender equality and women's empowerment are essential components of human development

and basic human rights. The advancement of women's rights and the education of girls are critical preconditions for effective and sustainable development”.

- It is a challenge in many parts of the Commonwealth to secure the equitable election of women to representative office.
- I very look forward to exploring this issue further with you during the conference, where I intend to highlight some of the Commonwealth Secretariat's initiatives for promoting and strengthening women's political participation, I also look forward to hearing from yourselves what issues and trends are emerging from the various regions of the Commonwealth. This dialogue will be an important input into the shaping of our work programme in this vital area.

Junior Elections Professionals (JEP) Initiative:

- Allow me to return to my opening recognition of three people present this week who were part of our Commonwealth Junior Election Professionals (JEP) Initiative.
- This has arisen from our recognition that sustainability of national institutions requires investment in capacity, especially in those coming up through the ranks; that most Commonwealth societies are young societies in which most of the population is under 29 years of age; and that our Charter highlights that the future success of the Commonwealth depends upon our

investment in future generations, especially our investment in their commitment to the culture and institutions of democracy.

- The first phase of the JEP initiative, funded with the support of the Australian Government, drew to a successful close in October last year.
- It delivered regional capacity-building events to 88 junior election professionals from 42 Commonwealth election management bodies. You will be receiving a detailed briefing on its impressive results later tomorrow.
- A second phase of the JEP Initiative is due to begin in July this year. Of interest to many of you here, the second phase will include a focus on the needs of non-permanent and micro-election management bodies in the Caribbean and Pacific regions. We look forward to sharing further information in due course and to receiving your nominations of junior professionals whose talent can be nurtured.

Election Management: A Compendium of Commonwealth Good Practice

- The Secretariat, with the support of the CEN membership, has devoted a lot of effort towards developing a Commonwealth Compendium of Good Electoral Practice. This is a fresh initiative that sets out for the first time the key features expected to be found in all Commonwealth national election management bodies.

- In addition, the Compendium reflects the diversity of our membership by also summarising the value of key provisions and individual characteristics that exist in each of our election management bodies.
- Mr Ramkerrysingh, it is my honour and pleasure to present to you the first proof of this Compendium. The Secretary-General will formally launch of the Compendium in September this year, and all delegates will receive copies of the first proof tomorrow morning.

Conclusion

- Distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen, I wish you every success in your deliberations, and our Secretariat team looks forward to supporting you this week and beyond. We also look forward to doing so with a vision that is forward-looking, results that are practical, and partnerships that are mutually beneficial and that stretch all of us in positive ways.
- Thank you again.