

CTUG response to COMMONWEALTH STATEMENT ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC¹

The Commonwealth Trade Union Group (CTUG) brings together trade unions in Commonwealth countries, with over 70 million members. We are part of the International Trade Union Confederation with over 200 million members in 164 countries and territories.

We welcome the aspirations in the statement (especially on promoting multilateralism and especially support for the WHO and universal health coverage, debt sustainability, gender and particularly on decent work.) It is worrying that there is no reference to the need to provide social protection, especially for those in the informal sector and only limited commitments to protecting people's jobs.

In a spirit of seeking improvements rather than criticism, the statement demonstrates that the Commonwealth finds it easier to express general views about policies, rather than making sure they happen or that better actions are taken. It would be good for the Commonwealth to be promoting positive changes in the multilateral environment (given that the Commonwealth represents five G20 economies, 2 of the G7 nations, and nearly a third of the UN), and encouraging member states either through these multilateral bodies or independently to promote rights at work, social protection and equality.

We also note that what is said in the statement does not apply to many member states, in particular to India, where the government seems committed to a rather different set of values in terms of decent work, tolerance and respect.

What is welcome in the statement

The opening comments, on the need to build resilience and the part played by frontline workers in the health and other sectors, as well as the sympathy expressed for those affected by the pandemic, including those who have died and those who have suffered economically, are well judged. The emphasis on the values embodied in the Commonwealth Charter, including human rights, the rule of law, consistency with international treaties and obligations, is welcome. And we particularly value the commitment to resist hate speech, incitement to violence and the division of communities.

We also welcome the closing section of the statement, on global cooperation and multilateralism. We strongly agree that “the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the importance of multilateral cooperation in a rules-based international system” and the reaffirmation of the Commonwealth’s “shared responsibility to work with the United Nations, other international and regional organisations and IFIs in our response, ... to realise the 2030 Agenda and the aspirations of the Commonwealth Charter.”

In that context, the support for the leadership of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and to quality and affordable medicines and vaccines for all, as well as international collaboration on research and development of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, is vital. So is the commitment to “support the continued flow of these vital medical supplies, commodities and equipment, agricultural and food products, and other essential goods and services across borders to further support our citizens’ health,

¹ <https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Commonwealth%20Statement%20on%20COVID-19%20FINAL%20VERSION.pdf>

and mitigate the risk of food insecurity and malnutrition.” And it is good to see renewed commitment to “access to domestic and gender-based violence services, women’s and girls’ health, maternal health, sexual and reproductive health, as well as providing other essential services such as water, sanitation and hygiene.”

In terms of the economy, we welcome the commitment to “minimize the economic, social and environmental damage from the pandemic, maintain economic and financial stability, safeguard jobs and strengthen resilience.” Likewise, we agree with the Commonwealth that the G20 COVID-19 Action Plan on supporting the global economy, including the time-bound suspension of debt service payments by the poorest countries is important, as is the action taken by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) “to help their members tackle the crisis.”

The Commonwealth rightly recognises the impact of the pandemic on the vulnerability of workers, especially migrant workers and those working in the informal economy, the increased risks of modern slavery and human trafficking, and the impact on young people, the disabled and women - especially in terms of gender-based and domestic violence. We welcome in particular the commitment to “ensure that temporary shocks do not have long-lasting or permanent implications for poverty reduction and **the ability of all workers to enjoy safe and decent work**” (our emphasis).

We welcome the commitment to work together with others for urgent reform of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and for a “multilateral trading system and a free, fair, inclusive, predictable and stable trade and investment environment, which takes into account the special requirements of least developed countries and small and vulnerable economies.”

We welcome the section on small and vulnerable states, including the recognition that “the impacts of the pandemic have highlighted and exacerbated” the many challenges they face, “bringing acute economic setbacks which, with their other vulnerabilities, severely limit these states’ ability to respond effectively.” As the statement says, action must include “sustainable debt restructuring coordinated via the international financial architecture, mitigating the effects of economic contraction, increasing resilience and providing equitable access to essential medicines, equipment and supplies.”

What more could be said, and, in particular, done

More should have been said in the statement about tackling the effect of the pandemic on jobs, incomes and social protection (although the references to safeguarding jobs and ensuring safe and decent work are welcome as far as they go.) There is no indication of what action will be taken to protect and restore employment, or to ensure work is safe, and no commitment to promote wider social protection (such as supporting the ITUC call for a Global Fund for Social Protection which would cost just \$37bn over five years².)

While we welcome the commitment to minimising trade barriers, we are concerned that this is the limit³ of action proposed on the responsibilities of those involved in global supply chains. The pandemic has revealed how little protection workers in those supply chains have, and the need for mandatory due diligence by the multinational enterprises involved.

² https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_campaign_brief_-_a_global_social_protection_fund_en.pdf

³ “All stakeholders in global supply chains should share the responsibility for working together constructively to keep them open and mitigate the pandemic’s impact on trade.”

Likewise, the welcome commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the connectivity agenda of promoting “the adoption of digital technologies as a positive enabler in order to increase resilient, inclusive and diverse trade and investment, and to strengthen global supply chains” and support for sustainability in the face of climate change (where we again, endorse the objectives set out) contain no references to the need for Just Transitions⁴ to ensure that such developments are, in every sense, sustainable or resilient.

As all too often, the commitment to opposing discrimination refers to age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, political, economic or other grounds, but does not explicitly support LGBTQI communities. And although concern is expressed about gender-based and domestic violence, there is no call on member states to ratify and implement the ILO’s 2019 convention on violence against women⁵.

We would stress the need to make the values set out in the statement live. It is perhaps understandable that there is no direct criticism of those member states who are currently explicitly **not** living up to the values expressed in the statement – such as India, where the government seems committed to increasing the vulnerability of workers and spreading hate speech and discrimination on the basis of faith. But India is not alone, and the Commonwealth does have a duty to call out bad behavior among its members, especially when advocating good behavior as something that Commonwealth countries should be proud of.

Finally, the concluding paragraph rather raises the question of what the Commonwealth **could** do. It says “we recognise that the strength and potential of the Commonwealth lie in collaboration between its member states, its intergovernmental organisations – the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning; and its network of associated and accredited organisations.” The Commonwealth statement omits, except in the most tentative and vague terms, to set out exactly what it will press for in the international community beyond what has already been agreed in the G20, the IFIs, the ILO and the rest of the UN family.

⁴ <https://www.ituc-csi.org/global-shifts>

⁵ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190