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COMBATING RAPID URBANISATION AND RURAL DECLINE: A CHALLENGE FOR THE COMMONWEALTH

Moderator: Hon. Anthony Michael Perkins, MP, Speaker of Parliament (St Kitts and Nevis)

Discussion Leaders:

- Hon. Shri Hriday Narayan Dikshit, MLA, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly (Uttar Pradesh)
- Senator Yuen Pau Woo (Canada Federal)
- Dr Greg Munro, Secretary-General, Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF)

Rapporteurs: Mr William Lubowa and Mr Basala Martin (Parliament of Uganda)

This workshop session focused on the impact of rapid urbanisation and rural decline in various jurisdictions within the Commonwealth. During the workshop, urbanisation was defined as the shift from a rural to an urban area leading to large concentrations of people into towns and cities. It was highlighted that with over half of the world's population currently living in urban areas and a further 2.5 billion expected to be added to that population by 2050, urbanisation and the concurrent rural decline will become an increasingly salient issue for leaders and policy makers in the coming years.

The major drivers of urbanisation stated at the workshop include search for economic opportunities, population growth, environmental degradation, desire for change of lifestyle, among others. The adverse effects of urbanisation include overcrowding and slums which experience major problems such as poverty, poor sanitation, unemployment and high crime rates.

It was further highlighted that urbanisation challenges are unique and vary across countries and therefore, home-based solutions should be adopted. In order to address urbanisation challenges, it is critical that countries develop and adopt integrated plans to guarantee equitable and holistic development for both the rural and

urban areas. Lastly, Parliaments should ensure inclusive budgets with a focus on rural development.

Senator Yuen Pau Woo (Canada Federal) started the discussion by noting that urbanisation is common amongst almost all countries in the Commonwealth but the challenges that come with it vary from one State to another. Senator Woo gave the experience of Canada where 80% of the population is in urban areas while only 20% resides in rural areas.

Senator Woo said that Canada is a resource dependent economy which is increasingly subject to the global forces of commodity and resource markets that drive the industries that support rural communities. These forces have very powerful effects on livelihoods of rural communities. For instance, innovations like mechanisation that require fewer workers in resource industries create population decline in rural areas because fewer people are employed in these industries. They move to urban areas in search for opportunities.

Senator Woo further said that Canada's population growth and distribution are driven by immigration because of its open immigration policy which accepts roughly 1% of its population in form of newcomers from other countries every year. However, most of these immigrants end up in

urban areas although the intention of the open immigration regime is to attract them to provinces with rural population decline.

Dr Greg Munro, Secretary-General, Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) said that urbanisation is not only about huge cities but also increased unplanned human settlements especially in places like the Pacific Region. He said that one of the key drivers of urbanisation is lack of economic activities in rural areas. For this reason, many youths move to urban areas in search of economic activities.

Dr Munro further observed that lack of women's land rights causes many women, especially widows, to move to urban places. He noted that this issue can have adverse ripple effects on women's livelihoods because they cannot utilise their land for economic activities.

In addition, he noted that cities are safer especially in countries with conflict and therefore, people usually move to urban areas for safety reasons. He observed that urbanisation challenges are unique and consequently, they vary across countries and among urban and rural areas.

Dr Munro said that the biggest challenge in regard to urbanisation is that countries plan separately for rural areas and urban areas which doesn't ensure equitable development. Accordingly, urbanisation

concerns need to be addressed in a holistic way by ensuring integrated planning for rural and urban areas.

Hon. Shri Hriday Narayan Dikshit, MLA, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly (Uttar Pradesh) said that the main challenges brought by urbanisation include an increase in slum population, acute shortage of affordable housing, shortage of drinking water, environmental problems like air, water and noise pollution, increased pressure on land, lack of mass transport among others. He observed that that urbanisation challenges are unique and vary across countries and therefore, home-based solutions should be adopted.

Dr Greg Munro emphasised that it is critical for countries to develop and adopt integrated plans that guarantee equitable development and service provision for both the rural and urban areas. In order to solve urbanisation challenges, Dr Munro proposed that Legislatures should ensure that the budgets are inclusive and focus more on rural and urban development. In addition, Parliaments should use their leverage to support small scale businesses in rural areas through procurement of services and goods and encourage establishment of industries in rural areas to bring economic activities and jobs to rural areas.

Hon. Shri Hriday Narayan Dikshit, MLA (Uttar Pradesh) proposed that in order to stop rampant migration to urban settlements, services such as new technology, proper infrastructure, health care, education and energy should be available to rural areas as a means of job creation to the rural youth.

Rt Hon. Rebecca Kadaga, MP, Speaker of the Parliament of Uganda noted that urbanisation is a function that causes the lack of opportunities in rural areas. She said that due to lack of job opportunities, the youth sell land in rural areas and move to

urban areas. She proposed that countries need to learn from Cuba which has been able to address urbanisation by ensuring equitable planning and development.

Hon. Dr Esther Mcheka-Chilenje, MP (Malawi) asked whether a universal policy on urbanisation could be developed and shared across Commonwealth countries. This could help Legislatures that it is implemented to address the challenges resulting from uncontrolled urbanisation.

Hon. Kassiano Wadri, MP (Uganda) blamed urbanisation on the existing education system. He observed that the current education system prepares people for white-collar jobs other than job creation. He proposed that the education system should focus more on training job creators, especially in the agricultural sector which has potential to employ many youths.

Hon. Suhaizan Kayat, Speaker of the State Assembly (Johor) shared his country's efforts to address urbanisation. He said that poverty went down and household incomes increased largely on the account of the enhanced rural infrastructure, with increased access to clean water and electricity as well as improved urban and rural linkages among others.

Hon. Syda Bbumba, MP (Uganda) said that most of the people who migrate to towns are youth who have a high likelihood of becoming criminals. She also noted that we need to create special funds to provide start-up capital for small scale businesses.

She further proposed that countries need to commercialise agriculture and create agro processing industries.

A Member from South Africa asked how other countries were



addressing the challenge of the lack of clean water, especially during dry seasons. She noted that this was a major challenge for rural development and sustainability and attributed this to climatic change effects which need to be addressed. She recommended that use of plastics should be banned in all Commonwealth countries. She further advocated for targeted social support towards the much-needed services in rural areas.

Dr Greg Munro responded to the question of water shortages and he proposed that Commonwealth countries need to look into best practices for water use, water recycling, climate smart gardens and farming. He further proposed that countries can look into the training of small-scale farmers and sharing of farming equipment.

Senator Woo, on the issue of safe water, noted that a shortage of safe drinking water is common, especially in isolated communities in Canada. In regard to rural decline;

he advised that urbanisation should not be viewed as the source of decline for rural communities but rather to ensure that countries adapt the latest technologies in agriculture so as to address the urbanisation challenge.

At the end of the discussions, the three workshop recommendations were endorsed as follows:

- Parliaments should focus on building sustainable livelihoods in urban and rural communities that are unique to their needs and circumstances.
- CPA Parliamentarians support Commonwealth efforts on sustainable human settlements by partnering with locally elected leaders to frame policy for effective delivery at the local level.
- Rural and urban are complimentary to each other. Parliaments should focus on regulation of urbanisation and development of rural areas such as in India.

