

The Commonwealth



What is the Commonwealth?

The Commonwealth is a group of 53 countries in the world. These countries all have different sizes, populations and wealth but they all have a goal to improve people's lives. They believe that this improvement will take place through education, health, work and a clean safe environment.



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How many people are part of the Commonwealth?

The 53 countries in the Commonwealth, in six different continents, have a total population of 2.1 billion people (which is almost a third of the world's entire population).



India has the largest population in the Commonwealth (with 1.17 billion people) and Tuvalu has the smallest (with about 10,000 people).

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What do Commonwealth countries believe?



The people of the Commonwealth all speak different languages and have many different religious beliefs.

However, they all believe in a democratic government, have similar legal systems and support education for all. They also believe in protecting people's human rights. They support freedom of speech, are against racism and discrimination, fight poverty and want to improve the environment.

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What is the history of the Commonwealth?

Most of the countries in the Commonwealth were once part of the British Empire and were ruled by Britain. This is why English is used as the common language in the Commonwealth.

In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, some of the countries asked to become independent and make their own decisions. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa all became independent. They all kept the British monarch but were now equal to Britain and joined Britain as a member of the 'British Commonwealth of Nations'.

India also wanted to become independent but Britain didn't want to allow this. With the help of peaceful demonstrators (such as Mahatma Gandhi), India became independent in 1947. It agreed to keep the British monarch as its head of state. So, the term 'British' was then dropped and the group changed its name to the 'Commonwealth of Nations'.

Other countries have joined and left the Commonwealth over the years. Pakistan left in 1972 but rejoined in 1989 and the Gambia left in 2013.



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What is the Commonwealth like today?

All of the Commonwealth countries share the same set of values and goals. The Heads of Government in each of the countries agree to these principles. People's rights are considered to be very important. These rights include:

- Civil rights (e.g. the right to follow your own chosen religion),
- Economic rights (e.g. the right to a good standard of living),
- Social rights (such as the right to education and fair working conditions).



The Commonwealth



What is Commonwealth Day?



Commonwealth Day takes place on the second Monday in March every year. It celebrates all of the amazing work, projects and beliefs supported by the Commonwealth. Parades, lectures, activities and special multi-faith services are held throughout the Commonwealth.

The day has a special theme every year. In 2014, the theme was 'Team Commonwealth' to celebrate friendship and unity in the Commonwealth.

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What does the Commonwealth flag represent?

The Commonwealth flag shows a globe surrounded by spears in the shape of a 'C'. The spears symbolize the number of different activities taking place in the Commonwealth around the world.



The Commonwealth



Who is the head of the Commonwealth?

Queen Elizabeth II is the current head of the Commonwealth. The Queen does not make any decisions about what the Commonwealth does. She is a symbol of unity, representing the countries who are working together as equals. The next head of the Commonwealth will be chosen by the Heads of Government.



The Commonwealth



What does the head of the Commonwealth do?

The Queen visits Commonwealth countries and has regular meetings with the Commonwealth Secretary-General and the Heads of Government.



She also speaks to the people of the Commonwealth countries in her Christmas message every year. This is broadcast around the world.

The Commonwealth

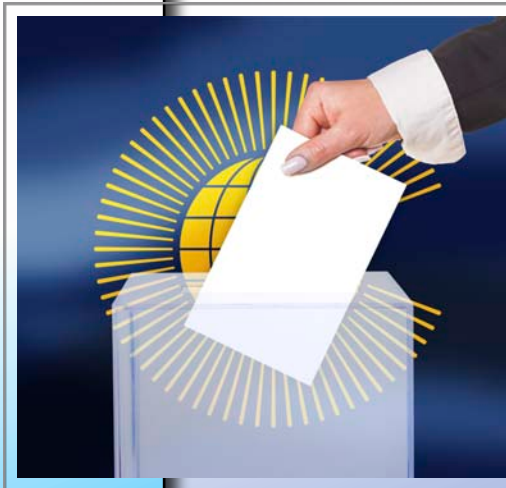


What does the Commonwealth do?

The Commonwealth works together to help solve problems and improve people's lives. This is done in a number of ways:

Supporting Democracy

Democracy is when the people in a country can choose their own leaders. The Commonwealth ensures democracy takes place by sending people out to elections, to make sure that people can vote and that the votes are counted properly.



Environment

Countries under threat from changes in climate (e.g. rising sea levels or droughts) are helped by Commonwealth advisors. They suggest ways to help prevent these life threatening situations.

Trade

The Commonwealth tries to help countries improve their economies. This can be done by training people and giving them new skills (e.g. teaching farmers how to grow crops that can be sold to other countries) or showing countries how to manage their natural resources, (e.g. how to make more money from tourism).

Health Care

The Commonwealth helps to train health workers to set up clinics. These vaccinate people against diseases and teach people how to prevent themselves from getting ill.

Young People

The Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) encourages young people to be involved in their country's affairs by forming youth parliaments. They support education, training skills and finding jobs. They also set up programmes so that even remote rural communities can have access to books and technology.

