

19 April 2010
Kamalesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General
Commonwealth Broadcasting Association conference – theme ‘Broadcasting
Scores’
Johannesburg, South Africa

The Commonwealth and the Fourth Estate
Democracy, development and the media

When the world beyond these shores and this continent looks at Africa, how often they look specifically at *South Africa*.

And in 2010, sport brings you not just into the African but also into the global spotlight once more, just as it so famously did when in 1995 Nelson Mandela shook hands with Francois Pienaar as South Africa lifted the Rugby World Cup.

At the time, it was the stuff of fairy tales.

In 2010, it has even been the stuff of Hollywood cinema.

To Abubakar Jijiwa, President of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, to Elizabeth Smith its Secretary-General, and to all at the CBA, I thank you, too, not just for the achievement of creating this exceptional platform for debate and exchange, but for all your ongoing works.

The CBA, lest we forget, is older by four years than the intergovernmental Modern Commonwealth which succeeded the British Commonwealth in 1949. Your full and associate membership numbers exactly 100 public service broadcasters, inside and outside the Commonwealth, many of whom are here today.

We applaud you for your work training journalists, for producing and disseminating the monthly radio programme which you call ‘The Pick of the Commonwealth’, for developing draft media codes and guidelines for independent media regulators, and much more.

And to the CBA’s conference partners and co-hosts, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), I add another note of thanks.

You are an organisation with a long and proud history of almost 75 years.

The challenge, of course, is to be true to the values of inclusiveness, independence and fairness, especially in the face of domestic and international competition which we should all welcome, but which may not share or embrace your goals as official broadcasters to the nation.

One of Africa’s big media challenges remains the transformation of former state broadcasters into true ‘public service broadcasters’, in which being at the service of a country is seen as consistent with being an arm of the government, and in which the official obligation is serving the people.

The higher the goals, the greater the challenge of meeting them.

And public service broadcasting brings the extra responsibilities that come with service.

The CBA and SABC have convened this conference today under the intriguing headline of 'Broadcasting scores'.

The prompt for your theme was, of course, the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, which kicks off in 52 days time when the host South Africa plays the 1970 host Mexico, right here in Johannesburg.

Let me summarise my – very simple – two-part argument today.

First, I shall say that 'broadcasting scores' – or reporting on sporting events – is more than it seems.

It is in fact an exercise, conscious or unconscious, which is inseparable from broadcasting the nature of societies, their idiosyncrasies and their values.

Both a country's sport and a country's media have the power to *reflect* a society – they are a window looking *outwards* to the world, and a mirror looking *inwards*, reflecting what they see.

Second, I shall look a little further at how the media can reflect a society, and make a society reflect on itself as well.

This is the core of our argument, that the media is a fundamental element of any country's striving for the three things which we in the Commonwealth value the most: democracy, development, and diversity.

1

The World Cup is both window and mirror – one looks through it at things beyond it; and as one looks at it, one sees things in reflection.

What will it tell us about the world as a community of nations?

What will it tell us about South Africa, the hosts?

Will it reaffirm us in shared values, shared bonds, and the shared experience not just of football but of life?

Will we see sport as high-performance, high-pay, high-profile, or as something for all, and an important element in social, economic, even political development and transformation?

We do, of course, have a yardstick by which to make comparisons, in the form of the Commonwealth Games.

8,000 athletes and officials from 71 nations and territories will circle the track at the Jawaharlal Nehru stadium in New Delhi at the opening ceremony of the 19th Commonwealth games on 3rd October.

And hundreds of millions of people – many outside the Commonwealth, for instance in the US through the Fox Network, and across Asia courtesy of the Asian Broadcasting Union – will watch on television.

Of course, it may be easy to idealise the significance of major sporting or other events, and to impute too much significance to projects with which one is too closely associated.

But we do hope and believe that the Delhi Commonwealth Games of 2010 – like Melbourne in 2006 and no doubt Glasgow in 2014 – will live up to its unofficial title, of 'the Friendly Games'.

Athletes have long contended that the atmosphere amongst competitors and crowds is warmer than at the Olympic Games – tribute, no doubt, to the bonds of language, shared systems and institutions, and above all values, which are the glue that binds those Games.

Athletes and spectators also revel in the fact that the Commonwealth Games are for all.

When the Cook Islands or the Turks & Caicos Islands send representatives to the Games, they know that the Commonwealth is providing them with a global stage on which to be themselves.

We are an organisation in which 10,000-strong Tuvalu has equal footing with billion-strong India, and that is as it should be.

For we believe that every individual and every nation has an equal right to its place in the sun.

So South Africa's Football World Cup will also be a window and a mirror, on the 32 of the world's 200 or so nations which will compete, and indeed on the 170 or so who will watch.

All of those qualifying countries will, for a short while, be in the forefront of our minds.

We see that largely *non*-soccer-playing USA, Australia and New Zealand have qualified.

Will Greece pose a more robust defence than what we are currently reading about?

What price a ticket for a historic fixture if North plays South Korea?

This mini-United Nations, this mini-global community, will again make us reflect on countries large and small, rich and poor, new and old, and the national and personal stories behind the teams.

The world will reflect, too, on the scale of the media operation surrounding this World Cup.

They may not ask how TV rights go beyond FIFA TV and SABC and screen images into their own homes – they will merely expect this to be case.

They may ask how FIFA plans to spend the near \$3 billion it will make from selling television rights to the tournament.

The burgeoning global mobile phone market (nowhere more vibrant than on the host continent) will expect to be able to see footage in the palms of their hands.

I understand that many of the games will be shown in 3D.

Come what may: one in seven of the world's population – over a billion people – will watch the Final on television on 11th July.

And how will South Africa look, under the world's gaze?

After 15 years of democracy and the Rainbow Nation, what will the world see? It will see a G20 member, rich in human talent, natural resource and industrial drive, a motor for growth across the African continent, a powerful player in this region and the world.

It will see a nation still throwing off the shackles of history, which has taken giant strides in just a decade and a half.

It will see a living organism, and a colourful, committed, continuing exercise in the Commonwealth's triple pursuits of democracy, development and diversity.

It will see new leadership, another scion of a proud political party of nearly 100 years standing.

And anyone visiting here will see a vibrant media, never more visible than in the amount of flourishing private radio stations, and in new FM stations fostering public debate.

It will of course see the other side of the coin too.

It is in the nature of a responsible and independent global media to look at all aspects of South Africa's challenges.

So eyes from afar will be trained on the serious challenges of crime, and poverty, and HIV, and education, which this country is committed to overcoming.

There may well be some who will cite security concerns, which in many ways have been allayed by South Africa's record to date, hosting the cricket 20/20 world championships in 2007, and the FIFA Confederations Cup last year, and indeed the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.

Perhaps the sharpest eyes of all will scrutinise a country that is home to every colour of the rainbow.

South Africa can be a beacon to this continent and to the world as home to people of every background.

Diversity can be a source of dynamism, not division.

The media is charged with being responsible, and should beware stereotyping and hyperbole: yes, there are racial challenges in this country, as there are in many others.

And those challenges can be met.

It is at the core of the Commonwealth that all are of value, and that each person must be able to find his or her fulfilment.

It was the Commonwealth which fought tooth and nail against apartheid in this very country, such that Nelson Mandela's first trip as President in 1994 was to London: not to Downing Street, but to the Royal Commonwealth Society.

There, he announced the country's return to a Commonwealth which, he said, 'makes the world safe for diversity'.

It was also the Commonwealth which – in the wake of 9/11 and a request from Heads of Government to examine the causes of fracture in our societies – stressed the multiple layers of individuality and identity.

These transcend group affiliations, and as easily embrace sport, and art, and music, and all of the other things which give us individual depth and identity.

I share these sketches, as this is what the world will see and think and interpret in just over a month's time at the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

And it is you, the media, which will provide the window and the mirror – allowing people to see others and to see themselves.

This is also why we in the Commonwealth attach enormous importance to the role of the media in promoting democracy and development.

It is why I applaud this conference and this gathering, and the many-faceted way in which it is looking at the role of the media, in covering sport and much, much more.

Your workshops on the media and climate change with SABA, TVE and Oxfam, on health with the Wellcome Trust, on social justice with the Commonwealth Foundation, on broadcast regulation with UNESCO – all are testimony to the fact that this conference is looking at the media in the round, and at its central role in society.

In the Commonwealth we talk of the indispensable three-legged stool of the public sector and the private sector and what we call the ‘third sector’, that of civil society.

And we talk, too, of the Fourth Estate: the media in which it is you in the broadcast media who clearly enjoy the lion’s share of the market.

2

This leads me to look at the media, as media is a fundamental element of any country’s striving for democracy, development, and diversity.

In doing so, I have drawn from words I used in Kigali, Rwanda, in January, as the Commonwealth welcomed its newest member into its fold.

Rwanda, of course, came to the brink of the abyss in 1994, and sections of its media played a shameful part in that drama.

Now, that country is rising from the ashes, and I wanted to stress the role that a free, lively and responsible media can play in transforming democratic societies.

A responsible media has a pivotal role to play in fostering democracy, development, and diversity.

And as technology gives it ever more power and reach, its responsibility becomes all the greater.

A democracy means many things, and one of those is a lively, free, and responsible press.

A free media holds up a mirror to society, and is itself a reflection of a vibrant democracy.

A media that can work freely in the dissemination of information and informed opinion will benefit everyone – from individuals to governments, to civil society and the business community – because it lifts social awareness and puts them in a better place to make informed and responsible decisions.

The media should be the voice of the people, accommodating *all* its voices, ensuring that the more dominant voices do not drown out the lesser.

What all must realise and respect is that the media space is a public trust, with newspapers and broadcasters the public trustees.

But just as democracy is a ‘work-in-progress’ in every Commonwealth country, so too is a free and responsible media.

An important recent Commonwealth publication entitled *The Eyes of Democracy: Media in Elections* makes the point that broadcasters have a more elevated role now than at any other point in history, and with it even greater responsibility.

On this continent, we have seen the media rise to that responsibility: I think particularly of Ghana in 2008.

And we have seen it fall, too.

I do not need to retrace old and painful footsteps over the role of sections of media which have fostered ethnic division and hatred.

All we can do is to point to the remedy and the goals we set for ourselves, and indeed the way in which the Commonwealth has worked with local media in politically charged situations to foster responsible reporting.

Recent examples include the training we gave in Kenya in January 2008, and in Zambia in February 2009.

The Commonwealth assists the work towards establishing media freedom and responsibility as an ingredient of democracy in other ways, too.

We work in almost every field, by lobbying, explaining, persuading, encouraging, building capacity, and pressing always for improvement.

The Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, the Commonwealth Journalists Association, and the new Commonwealth Press Union Trust are involved in this work, as is the inter-governmental Commonwealth Secretariat.

We ensure that there is a strong media element to our election monitoring, in working for a level playing field in the way that political parties use the media, and vice-versa.

This year, we have made public comment on the role of the media in elections in St Kitts & Nevis and Sri Lanka, and elections in the UK, the Solomon Islands, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda are upcoming.

Only last week, we finished updating a code of conduct between government and media in Guyana, first developed in a volatile situation in the run-up to the 2006 elections there.

On top of that, our Commonwealth Media Development Fund – some 30 years old, and now being given new impetus with Indian funding – has trained over 6,000 journalists in the past decade.

They are trained in the best practices of thorough, balanced, unbiased, responsible journalism.

I hope that other member governments will step up to the plate, to use another expression drawn from the world of sport, to support media development.

We also work to strengthen the enforcement mechanisms that allow media to operate, especially the laws which promote freedom of access to information.

Let me touch on Development.

Development is linked to democracy: research makes it clear that there is an organic correlation between democracy – including a robust and free media – and economic growth.

And it is democracy itself which underpins the huge potential of the media to help fight our development battles, against poverty and injustice.

In the developed world, the media can help fight poverty by educating and challenging people to right the wrongs and the deprivations of the developing world.

In the developing world itself, however, media can actually transform or even save lives – whether it is raising awareness of HIV/AIDS, or maternal health, or climate change, or peace and reconciliation in conflict zones.

We encourage the media to hold governments to account on their development promises.

We try and equip it to report objectively – as a service to the people of their country – on the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals, adopted by the global community at the United Nations.

We exhort journalists to report not just through generalisations and statistics, but through human testimony.

And we give them the materials to do so: in recent years we have produced powerful and widely broadcast TV materials on malaria and maternal and newborn health.

When I read in the latest issue of the CBA newsletter about the Government of the Maldives teaming up with the Commonwealth of Learning and the Open University of Malaysia to launch educational programmes via the internet, I see again the power of media to change Commonwealth lives for the better.

So I close by asking what sort of FIFA World Cup can the media have?

I pose a question which was memorably asked by the Nigerian poet Ben Okri: 'what thundershine shall light our fields?'

I would like to feel that the answer lies in Africa and African broadcasters leading the way, in telling the story of this 'African World Cup'.

When the mirror is held up to South Africa at the World Cup, it is in fact held up to us all, and to entire societies.

The media is at the heart of society and of this society, and your readers, viewers and listeners are at the heart of the task of creating prosperous societies, at peace with themselves and in service of their citizens.

We ask the media to be communicators and commentators in a great communal enterprise, in South Africa, the Commonwealth and the world.

Your freedom has come at a price – and must be exercised to a shared and noble purpose.

Thank you.

ENDS