

V&V

VISIONS & VOICES

The 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration: The Legacy of the Pacific's First Commonwealth Youth Forum

By Jasmine Koria



CHOGM 2024 – Day II. Photo courtesy of the Commonwealth Secretariat via Creative Commons BY-NC 2.0 license.

From October 21 to 22, 2024, the Independent State of Samoa hosted the Commonwealth Youth Forum (CYF) as part of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). This was the first-ever CHOGM to be hosted by a Pacific Small Island Developing State (PSIDS).

As part of the CYF Closing Ceremony, the 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration was officially launched. The first official ceremonial copies were presented to the Rt. Honorable Patricia Scotland, KC, Secretary General of the Commonwealth, and Afioga Mulipola Anarosa Ale-Molio'o, Samoa's Minister of Women, Community and Social Development. On October 24, the CYF International Taskforce was invited to participate in the CHOGM Intergenerational Dialogue Breakfast, where the Declaration's

launch was announced to and officially acknowledged by all other Commonwealth Heads of State. A symbolic copy was presented to Afioga Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, prime minister of the Independent State of Samoa and chair of the 2024 CHOGM.

As an "instrument of action" (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024), the 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration is a pivotal and unique part of the legacy of Oceania's first CYF and CHOGM. Having had the privilege of serving as a pillar lead for the drafting of the Declaration's first section, it is my hope that this document will influence both policy and action to improve the lives of the Commonwealth Pacific's Indigenous youth. The text itself is divided into four thematic sections called "pillars." Each one broadly addresses the political, environmental, economic, and societal

concerns that the 1.2 billion youth of the Commonwealth share. As with previous declaration versions, it is expected that the 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration will inform and guide the decisions made by governments and high-level civil society actors over the next two years (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024).

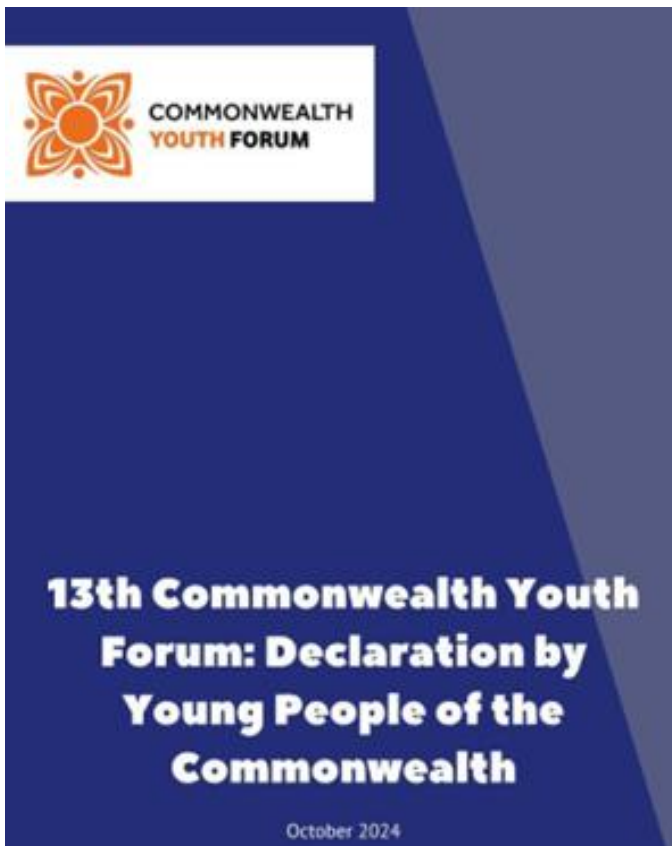


Figure 1. The official cover of the 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration, launched in Apia, the Independent State of Samoa, on October 22, 2024. Image courtesy of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Pillar One: Resilient Democratic Institutions

Being that democracy is one of the foundations of the Commonwealth association, the first section of the new Commonwealth Youth Declaration is dedicated to voicing how and why youth need to be included in the governance processes which shape the political climates in which they live (Koria 2024). The recommendations herein include new calls to action and the reiteration of existing ones. One of these is for Commonwealth countries in which the voting age is 21 to consider lowering it to at least 18. This is in light of the fact that in recent decades, youth all around the world have become markedly more engaged with political as well as social justice movements and narratives (Warren 2024). The increase of youth interest in these processes has been due to a growing sense of both responsibility for and frustration over the state of democracy in our world (Warren 2024). From the use of social media such as TikTok and Instagram for mass communication about government policies, political candidates, and current affairs, to organizing various forms of protest and raising awareness on climate change and Indigenous rights, youth below the age of 21 are doing the Commonwealth's democracy an

extremely pivotal service: they are participating. We need to both acknowledge and fully legitimize that participation by allowing more of this important demographic to actually vote.

Pillar Two: Resilient Environment

The geographically and economically vulnerable islands and atolls of Oceania continue to weather some of the most adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation; this is despite the fact that we contribute the least to both these global phenomena. The Commonwealth is a meeting point for both developed and developing states. The 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration therefore has also dedicated a section to listing the specific ways in which we as an association can work together to support vulnerable small island states whilst also actively reducing the carbon emissions of larger “producer” states. One of these recommendations is a reminder to governments and civil society actors that one of the most important forms of support they can give in this area is to initiate the mobilization of both public and private funding sources to help facilitate the rapid decarbonization of all Commonwealth countries (The Commonwealth Secretariat 2024). This call to action is extremely important, as it also iterates the need for the benefits of climate funding to be available to youth activists and community organizations at the grassroots level (The Commonwealth 2024). At present, much prospective climate funding, especially in Oceania, is not yet being mobilized to its fullest potential.



Figure 2. Members of the Commonwealth Youth Forum International Taskforce on stage after the official launch of the 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration. Ofusina Toamua (third from right) and Jasmine Koria (center) served as pillar leads for the writing of the declaration. Image courtesy of Commonwealth Secretariat.

Pillar Three: Resilient Economies

In seeking to ensure that the Commonwealth's collective economy develops holistically, a section of the declaration is dedicated to providing world leaders with targeted suggestions for more inclusive business and financial practices. A particularly important recommendation is the request for an increase in dedicated, targeted initiatives which focus on increasing youth employment and employability, as well as closing rural-urban pay gaps and eliminating all forms of ableism from both policy and practice (The

Commonwealth Secretariat 2024). Economic development, in this context, is and always has been inseparable from social justice. The Pacific's direct involvement in the writing of these recommendations has meant that our regional economic struggles, which include unemployment and having to contend with various forms of discrimination in our job markets, have been reflected in the new declaration. According to the International Labor Organization, at least 23 percent of people in the Pacific who struggle with unemployment are youth (2024). This is a worrying fact, particularly as many of our economies continue to be in recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and border closures.

Pillar Four: Resilient Societies and People

The final but most overarching pillar of the new declaration is a section which recommends a range of intersectional improvements in healthcare, education, gender equality, economic equity, and youth engagement. On October 24, I had the privilege of being the Oceania speaker at the CHOGM Intergenerational Dialogue Breakfast. There, I chose to highlight the reiterated call of the updated declaration for increased and improved youth mental health support in the Commonwealth. Mental ill-health continues to be a taboo subject in many Pacific societies, and yet it is vital that we raise consistent and accurate awareness of it because our region has historically had some of the highest youth suicide rates in the world (Howes et al. 1983). This has not been helped by the numerous recent disruptions to the few mental health support services that do exist in the developing Pacific (World Health Organization 2022). These disruptions include, but are not limited to, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the adverse impacts of the climate change crisis on lower-lying island states (World Health Organization 2022). Mental health itself is, of course, part of the declaration's broader call for all Commonwealth governments to invest more in developing, improving, and maintaining their national healthcare systems.

As the Commonwealth Year of Youth (2023/2024) officially draws to a close, it is most encouraging to see that the 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration is a concrete and officially recognized part of the legacy of our region's first CHOGM. We remain optimistic that its recommendations will materialize in ways that directly benefit our sea of islands, and especially the young people who are its incoming custodians.

Note: An electronic copy of the 13th Commonwealth Youth Declaration can be accessed here:

<https://thecommonwealth.org/news/chogm2024/commonwealth-youth-declaration>

References

Commonwealth Secretariat. 2024. "13th Commonwealth Youth Forum: Declaration by the Young People of the Commonwealth." Apia: Commonwealth Secretariat. [\[commonwealth-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-10/13th-commonwealth-youth-forum-declaration_1.pdf?VersionId=Fo2.c2pzYdybY8f5VT70FHVbk0E6P35G\]\(https://commonwealth-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-10/13th-commonwealth-youth-forum-declaration_1.pdf?VersionId=Fo2.c2pzYdybY8f5VT70FHVbk0E6P35G\)](https://production-new-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Howes, Oliver, Dennis O'Rourke, Philip Robertson, Tim Litchfield, and Graham Chase, dirs. 1983. *The Human Face of the Pacific: Samoa*. National Film and Sound Archive of Australia.

International Labor Organization. n.d. *Review of Youth Employment Policy in Pacific Island Countries*. International Labor Organization. Accessed November 30, 2024. <https://www.ilo.org/regions-and-countries/ilo-pacific/areas-work/youth-employment-policy-pacific-island-countries>.

Koria, Jasmine. 2024. "Leveraging Youth Leadership for Strengthening Democracies and Youth Engagement and Participation | YourCommonwealth." *YourCommonwealth*. October 22, 2024. <https://yourcommonwealth.org/youth-policy/leveraging-youth-leadership-for-strengthening-democracies-and-youth-engagement-and-participation/>.

Warren, Scott. 2024. "#YouthInAction – Promoting a Culture of Youth Political Participation - Youth Democracy Cohort." *Youth Democracy Cohort*. Youth Democracy Cohort. March 4, 2024. <https://youthdemocracycohort.com/youthinaction-promoting-a-culture-of-youth-political-participation/>.

World Health Organization. 2022. "Strengthening Mental Health Services in the Pacific during COVID-19 and Beyond." *Www.who.int*. World Health Organization. February 22, 2022. <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/strengthening-mental-health-services-in-the-pacific-during-covid-19-and-beyond>.

"Young Leaders Share Blueprint for Visionary Common Future with Commonwealth Leaders." 2024. *Commonwealth*. October 22, 2024. <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/chogm2024/young-leaders-share-visionary-future>.

Jasmine Koria (jasminevarakoria@gmail.com) was a member of the 2024 Commonwealth Youth Forum Taskforce. She co-chairs the Samoa Youth Advisory Board. Jasmine teaches senior English and History at Samoa Adventist College and is a communications skills lecturer at the National University of Samoa's Oloamanu Center for Professional Development and Continuing Education.

Visions & Voices is a quarterly periodical published by the Pacific Islands Development Program at the East-West Center. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of the Pacific Islands Development Program or the East-West Center.

Learn more at www.pireport.org