

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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The Significance of COP29 and the Role of Azerbaijan

Patricia Scotland KC

Baku Dialogues:

Good afternoon, Lady Scotland. On 11 May 2024, the Institute for Development and Diplomacy at ADA University was honored to host you as part of our Global Perspectives Lecture Series. This was done at the initiative of one of Azerbaijan's leading businessmen, Tahir Gözel, with many students, faculty, and alumni in attendance. And the idea of conducting this conversation for *Baku Dialogues* is an outcome of that event.

We hope to talk with you about the significance of COP29, the role you think the Azerbaijani COP29 presidency can play, the many concrete contributions of the Commonwealth to the climate debate and the COP process—including the importance of engaging with young people—and so on.

But before we get into any of these topics, we would like to ask you to say something more about yourself—about your journey—because we genuinely feel it's a story worth retelling, because it's frankly inspiring, and because you come from a part of the world that is largely unknown to much of our audience. And we're hoping you will agree to do this, notwithstanding the fact that we understand this is not exactly your favorite subject. And our excuse is that you have inscribed on your X account that

The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC is the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. A lawyer by training, she is the first black woman to be appointed a Queen's Counsel (QC), the youngest woman ever to be made a QC, and the first woman ever to hold the post of Attorney General. She joined the House of Lords in 1997 as Baroness Scotland of Asthal and went on to serve as a Minister in the Foreign Office, Home Office, and the Lord Chancellor's Department. The interview was conducted in stages between May and August 2024 by Damjan Krnjević Mišković and Fariz Ismailzade. The views expressed in this conversation are solely those of the participants.

you're a “proud child of Dominica, the UK, and the Commonwealth.” So, we'd like you to tell us a bit about this journey of yours.

Baroness Scotland:

Yes, you're right: I absolutely hate talking about myself, but it seems as if you give me no way out.

Well, I was born in one of the most beautiful islands in the Caribbean: The Commonwealth of Dominica. There are only about 70,000 people on my island, and therefore, it is said that if you have one Dominican in the room, then you have a large percentage of my population.

I was the tenth of 12 children and the last child to be born in Dominica. And I often say, in jest, that my brothers and sisters have not forgiven me because my parents had nine children and had decided that they could probably afford—with the greatest degree of difficulty—to send each of those children to the United Kingdom to university. And being educated abroad—back then, and perhaps even more so today—is quite expensive.

But my father was born in 1912, and my mother, who was born in 1919, were both feminists. And so, they did not want to do for their seven sons what they could not do for each of their daughters. And so, when it got to me, they realized that there was no way they could afford to educate ten children by sending them from Dominica to the United Kingdom. So, the decision was made to emigrate, and my other nine siblings have not forgiven me because they say—all in jest, of course—it's all my fault that we went to the United Kingdom in the 1950s.

Now, my mother and father were very much part of the Windrush generation—this is a term that applies those who arrived in the UK from Caribbean countries between 1948 and 1973. The name ‘Windrush’ derives from the HMT Empire Windrush ship, which brought one of the first large

groups of Caribbean people to the UK in 1948. And there was a labor shortage in the UK at the time, and as we were part of the Commonwealth, we could live and work permanently in the UK.

This was obviously a wonderful opportunity, but it wasn't an easy time to be a black Caribbean family in the late 1950s and 1960s—and particularly not when there were ten of you. And there were another two children who were born in the United Kingdom after we came over.

When I was growing up in the UK, I was always asked if I was an only child. And I always said, “Yes, I'm one of my parents' twelve *only* children,” because they'd say they *only* had one of each of us.

By the age of 20, I had undertaken my degree as a lawyer, and at the age of 21, I had qualified as a barrister, which means, basically, that I'm an advocate, and I go to court and represent people.

Then, at the age of 35, I became the youngest woman ever to be appointed Her Majesty's Queen's Counsel, and I was the youngest person ever to be made QC—save for William Pitt the Younger, who became Prime Minister at 21 and became an honorary silk, as we say. As a result, he got there before me, but I reckon he cheated because he didn't actually do the exams.

In any event, I became the first black woman to become a silk—a QC—and also the first black woman to become an assistant judge, the first black woman to become a deputy High Court judge, the first black woman to become a Master of the Bench of the Middle Temple, the first black woman to become a Baroness in the House of Lords, and the first black woman to become a minister in the government.

I then became the deputy to the first lead to the Foreign Office—we call this post the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State—then, I became number two to the Lord Chancellor,

and then I spent four years as Deputy Home Secretary. I then became the first woman ever to be appointed as Her Majesty's Attorney General for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland—this is an office which has existed since 1315.

And now, I am the first woman to be the Commonwealth Secretary-General, and I'm the sixth person to hold this office in the 75-year history of the modern Commonwealth.

Baku Dialogues:

This is all evidently quite impressive. It would be impressive even without all the firsts, but it is even more impressive because of all the firsts. It illustrates this incredible and oftentimes underappreciated meritocratic thread of British life. It also demonstrates your extraordinary drive.

Baroness Scotland:

My brothers say that I'm too stupid to do anything slowly—that I always seem to get there first, and that anyone with any sense wouldn't get there at all.

Baku Dialogues:

Well, but you have gotten all the way there, and perhaps there may be more road yet to travel. So, what drives you?

Baroness Scotland:

What drives me? I have always been driven by an intense feeling for justice—the things that are fair. I remember that I was about six years old when I had my first serious conversation about what was fair, and I was looking at the television, at what was happening in Soweto, South Africa. And I remember having a conversation with my father—I remember telling him that I

thought that what I was seeing on the screen was utterly unfair and wrong, and asking him why were people beating and killing children who looked just like me. And I was thrilled that my father said that he agreed with me—you know, I was six, and I thought that my father agreeing with me was really cool. And I said to him “this is wrong.” And he then asked me, “What are *you* going to do about it?”

And I thought, Me? Me? I’m six years old—what can I do? I was this quite short person with pigtails and still wore long socks. What could I do? And he said, “And your point *is*? It starts with you.”

And for the rest of my life, I’ve heard my father’s voice in my head saying, “So, what are *you* going to do about it? It starts with you.”

That is something that I have never been able to forget, and it has driven me. Also, what has driven me—and I have never hesitated about it—is a profound belief in God. I believe that God is the driver, and that through His Grace all things are possible, and when I can’t do things, He can.

So, if you ask, “Can *I* move a mountain?” I will say “Absolutely not.” But if you ask a different question, “Can *He* move that mountain?” the answer is, “Absolutely, He can.” So, my life has been a series of *Him* moving *my* mountains.

And there used to be a joke when I was at the bar as a lawyer—because I was very fortunate and I very rarely lost a case—and when I came back from what was at that point my latest victory, some of my colleagues would laugh, and they would tease me by asking, “Have you won a case again?” And I’d say, “Well, yes,” and they would interrupt and say, “No, no, stop. *Patricia* doesn’t win her cases, *God* does.” And I would say, “I’m glad you understand.”

So that’s what’s driven me, and this drive has taken me to places I never thought I’d go. It’s really a combination of hard

work and being determined to follow what my parents told me, which was that every single one of us is given a gift from God, and it’s our job to find it, to hone it, and then to use it for the benefit of other people. And those two things—plus this constant voice that asks me, “So, what are *you* going to do about it?”—have got me into a lot of trouble. But I have tried to answer those things, and to answer, “*This* is what I’m going to do about it.”

And when I speak to young people, especially, I say, “Don’t be frightened of being the first, don’t be frightened of starting something—even if no one else seems to see what you see: step out, do what you believe is right, and when you look around the corner, to your utter surprise, you will find that there are so many other people who are willing to walk with you.” I say to them, “Ask yourselves constantly ‘what am *I* going to do about it?’ and you’ll be surprised at what you can do and what you will achieve, but also don’t be surprised if you end up like me: being *extremely* surprised by what you’ve ended up achieving.”

Baku Dialogues:

This drive to do better, to be a driver for change, is—perhaps you will be surprised to hear—reminiscent of how this part of the world sees itself. It no longer wishes to accept the perception that it’s some sort of metaphorical chessboard, that the countries that belong to the region are pieces or objects on a board to be moved around according to the calculations, strategies, and ambitions of others; and they are seeking to overcome all this by taking the steps that they believe are necessary to become—or at least to having a chance to become—subjects of international order.

And in some way, this speaks to the editorial premise of *Baku Dialogues*. Perhaps we can bring this a bit more to the surface by referring to our journal’s subtitle—“Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region”—and by drawing out the implications of what this implies. Three of these rise to the mind.

First, we cover—in the broadest sense possible—topics of geopolitical and geoeconomic relevance to the overlapping set of regions to which Azerbaijan and its neighbors belong. We have defined the Silk Road region loosely—if you can picture a map of this part of the world—as looking west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the Caspian towards the Great Plain and the Great Steppe; east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan; and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley, looping down around in the direction of the Persian Gulf and across the Fertile Crescent.

Baroness Scotland:

May I interrupt for a moment? The Commonwealth does not have any members in this part of the world, but we work with a number of countries, including Azerbaijan. And we're delighted to work with Azerbaijan and others in the region, when we're invited—and we've been invited to work with Azerbaijan in preparation for COP 29, because we tend to say, "It's the Commonwealth *and friends*." So, if you're not a member, you're definitely a friend, and we can work together. But please go on.

Baku Dialogues:

Yes, there is a definite sense of friendship here, both with respect to the core countries of the Silk Road region, and to these countries and the Commonwealth. This is a very important point to make. And to this point, the Commonwealth and the COP29 Presidency have signed a landmark joint declaration to enhance climate action in SIDS—in Small Developing Island States—and other vulnerable countries. This historic agreement was recently signed in Tonga, a Commonwealth member, at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting by you and the COP29 President-Designate.

This is a good segway into the second implication of the editorial premise of *Baku Dialogues*—of our journal's subtitle, "Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region." It has to do with our focus on contemporary cross-cutting issues that have an impact on the international position of what we view as

one of the few keystone regions of global affairs. These range from energy politics and infrastructure security to economic development and cultural heritage. Obviously, climate change is another such issue—this has become even more important given Azerbaijan's presidency of COP29, which will take place in November 2024 in Baku. And we will obviously get into this during our conversation.

Third, we like to think that our choice of subtitle is an indication of our deep-seated conviction that the comprehensive rejuvenation of a vast region—which had stood for centuries at the fulcrum of trade, innovation, and refinement—requires both a healthy respect for frontiers as sovereign markers of territorial integrity and a farsighted predisposition to ensure that the region can continue to grow as a strategic center of attraction for capital, goods, talent, technologies, and innovation. The increasingly important role the region plays in various strategic connectivity projects, like the Middle Corridor, is evidently part of this. The incredible potential for the supply of renewable or green or clean energy, which is an integral component of the connectivity conversation—and this has direct bearing on the climate issue, obviously—is a part of that.

That's why we think of the editorial premise of *Baku Dialogues* in the following manner: the Silk Road region is and will remain an important seam of international relations, continuing to serve as, one, a significant political and economic crossroads between various geographies; two, an important intercessor between major powers; and three, an unavoidable gateway between different blocks of states, regional associations, and civilizational groupings.

And what's particularly interesting is that the Silk Road region does not really have a "go-to" geopolitical or geoeconomic hub that is an exclusive and integral part of the region. Here, it seems to us, the predominant reality is something else: a combination of formal treaties and informal understandings. Now, of course, there's also some tension, obviously; and frozen conflicts occasionally flare up into skirmishes and even open conflict—like the Second Karabakh War. And these sometimes end up altering the weight of one or more variables in the regional equation, if we may put it that way. But the trend is clear: in the Silk Road region, no one power dominates, equilibrium is maintained, and a general balance is kept. This is the operating rule of thumb, one could say. And we think that, over time,

the core countries of the Silk Road region will further bind themselves to one another through various arrangements, some of which may take institutional form; and we also think that the drive towards this situation will be led by the region's three keystone states—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan—acting in concert with one another.

It is useful, in this context, to recall the conversations that led to the development of ASEAN, or to the original European *Economic* Community. One could also think of what ended up becoming the Hanseatic League centuries ago. Maybe one could even uncover elements of the way in which the Commonwealth came about—and how it functions today, under your stewardship.

In any event, all these are major reasons why we remain rather bullish on the future prospects of the Silk Road region. And all this helps to paint a general picture of what we at *Baku Dialogues* focus on.

And this sort of thinking ought to resonate with the way that you in the Commonwealth see things, because of the way your membership is structured—because of the variety of geopolitical and geoeconomic postures and perspectives represented by the various states that are part of the Commonwealth family. And we know you spend much of your time with audiences made up of young people in many of those countries, because, as we have heard you point out, young people—people under the age of 30—represent about 60 percent of the total population of the countries that are part of the Commonwealth.

Baroness Scotland:

That's right. As the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, I am tasked with caring for and delivering the mandates given to me by 56 countries in our world. Those 56 countries represent more than 2.7 billion people. That's about one-third of humanity; and 60 per cent of that 2.7 billion is under the age of 30. So, the majority of the Commonwealth is under 30 years old.

When I speak to an audience of young people, I say to them, “Many will tell you that you are the leaders of tomorrow, but I

want to tell you that you are not the leaders of tomorrow: you are the leaders of today, because the choices that you make and the choices that you do not make will determine the shape of the world—not just tomorrow, but today.”

And the reason I say this is because our generation—those of us alive today—are the first generation to suffer the aberrant consequences of climate change.

Baku Dialogues:

You are passionate about countering the effects of climate change, and you have made this issue—in all its complexity—an integral part of your mission as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. Why is that?

Baroness Scotland:

The acts and omissions that were undertaken as a result of the Industrial Revolution were taken at a time when people did not understand the full impact of that which was being undertaken. But we do now, and both the tragedy and opportunity for us is that we may be the first generation to suffer the apparent consequences of climate change, but, in fact, we are the last generation to be able to do anything about it.

And what we know is that those who are suffering the most from climate change have committed the least towards its creation, and the pain and suffering that is visited on some of our smallest and most vulnerable countries are totally disproportionate in terms of their contribution to this disaster. Most of those small and developing countries made little or no contribution to it.

And that's why it is of such critical importance to our family of nations: the 56 countries that make up the Commonwealth. We have representation in the following regions of the world: Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, the Pacific, and the

Americas, and we cover the six basins of the great ocean which surrounds our whole planet.

Baku Dialogues:

This vast geographical diversity points to the socio-economic diversity of your members, which goes a long way in explaining why the Commonwealth was one of the first inter-state organizations in the world to substantively address the issue of climate change.

Baroness Scotland:

Yes, that's right. Thirty-three of our member states are small states, 15 of them are what are called Least Developed Countries. We have some of the richest and biggest countries in our family and some of the poorest, some of the largest populations and some of the smallest, some of the most developed cities, and some of the most endangered indigenous communities.

So, look back to 1989, when the Commonwealth came together in Langkawi in Malaysia, we said that if we didn't do something about climate, then it would pose an existential threat. If you look back at the Langkawi Declaration on the Environment, you will see that virtually everything that has happened in the past 30 or 40 years was written in that document, which in some sense was the first of its kind. Yes, the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established a year earlier, and the UN General Assembly endorsed its establishment a few months after that, but the IPCC issued what is known as its First Assessment Report only in 1990. So, after the Langkawi Declaration.

Also, the assembled Heads of Government of the Commonwealth at Langkawi—the conference that agreed on the text of that Declaration—came together three years before the first COP. So, in some sense, the Langkawi Commonwealth

meeting can be understood to be the first COP. Then, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted in 1992, and the first COP took place in Berlin in 1995.

Baku Dialogues:

And now the next COP—COP29—will take place in Baku later this year, in November 2024. And so, we come to the importance of Azerbaijan and its presidency of COP29. Why is this COP so *extraordinarily* important, as you have put it?

Baroness Scotland:

The countries that are suffering the most have the least ability to respond and the least amount of money. And, in 2009, as far back as COP15, the world accepted that reality—they accepted that those who polluted were not the most affected and those who had not were and that we globally had to redress that balance.

And this year, at Azerbaijan's COP, the whole issue of climate financing is going to become the focus. It's the Azerbaijani COP29 presidency's top negotiating priority. Azerbaijan should be proud—especially its young people—because the country is stepping forward to lead at a time when the world has never needed this issue to be addressed more.

From having had the privilege of talking to a number of people in Azerbaijan during my recent trip—including young people who came to hear me speak at ADA University on the day before the Spring exam period began. As you remember—I came to understand that Azerbaijan intends to be the voice of those who are not usually heard: the small, the damaged, those who have almost given up hope that anyone is listening. For the first time, a number of the small states are coming here to Azerbaijan to speak directly to a COP Presidency so that they can better understand what we now need to do.

Baku Dialogues:

You drew quite a crowd at ADA University, you know.

Baroness Scotland:

Yes, and I felt greatly honored by their choice to join the conversation. And I said to them, “Your support as individuals is really important: so often, when we think that we’re too small, we’re too insignificant, our voice doesn’t matter, there’s nothing we can do,” and my message was, “your voice matters—every single one of you. Your voice matters and what your government is trying to do at COP29 really matters, and that you need to be proud of them, you need to be supporting through your energy, your acuity, your knowledge.”

Too often young people think that the subjects they are studying are not attached to climate. But everything is now attached to climate. Most subjects they study are pivotally important to taking climate action—finding the solutions to many of the problems that we now face. A university’s leadership is critical, and ADA’s leaders should be congratulated. They set the tone for professors to encourage students under their care to harness their abilities and hone their skills. This will be the difference that, perhaps, will ensure that we come up with the right solutions. Most subjects students study are pivotally important to taking climate action—finding the solutions to many of the problems that we now face. A university’s leadership is critical, and ADA’s leaders should be congratulated. They set the tone for professors to encourage students under their care to harness their abilities and hone their skills.

Again, most subjects are now attached to climate. If it’s health, we know that our health is being materially impacted by the change in zoonotic diseases—that is, diseases transmitted from animals to humans. We also know our health is being materially impacted by the fact that the rate of non-communicable

diseases are going up, and they are also affected by what is happening on climate.

So is education, so is architecture, so is farming, so is food. Generally, everything you can think about is now fundamentally affected by climate, so whatever discipline students are undertaking at university, one part of it has to be asking, “How do I use this discipline to address the issue of climate?”

This is because climate is the world’s most pressing issue, and the stakes have never been higher than now. The need for decisive action on climate change has never been more acute. The March 2024 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report has sounded the alarm louder than ever before because the strapline, as we say in Britain—the tagline, as the Americans say—used to be enforceability to prevent the 2 degrees increase. Then it was 1.5 degrees to stay alive, and it wasn’t just a strapline for many countries: it was their reality even then, and we are at 1.5 now.

So, the clock has been ticking, and time is almost running out, and the impacts of climate change are being felt in floods, in fires, in storms and heat, in drought, and in rising sea levels all across the Commonwealth family of nations—but everywhere else as well. And, it is also being counted in lives lost and in the impact on livelihood, and in the decline in our gross domestic product. And the issue of debt is really rising swiftly, so Azerbaijan’s entry into this debate, at this moment in time, is an extraordinarily bold one.

We have all heard many people saying that to try and put on a COP in less than a year is bordering on madness, but Azerbaijan has never failed to rise to a challenge and overcome that challenge. And, the good thing is that Azerbaijan doesn’t have to do it on its own because it has the whole of the UN, the whole of the global community standing with it, encouraging it and showing concretely that it’s willing to help. Azerbaijan’s success at COP29 is the world’s success. We have all heard many people saying that to try and put on a COP in less than a

year is bordering on madness, but Azerbaijan has never failed to rise to a challenge and overcome that challenge. Azerbaijan's success at COP29 is the world's success.

Baku Dialogues:

Including the Commonwealth countries?

Baroness Scotland:

Certainly. All our Commonwealth countries are determined to give 110 per cent of support to make this happen, including my country, the United Kingdom. I say this not only because of the bilateral relationship—the extremely comprehensive investment the UK has had in Azerbaijan—but also because the UK has been one of the champions for climate change for many years. And so, if we look forward to where we're going next, then we have to be clear that we can't afford any more delay: there can be no more excuses. We have to act with urgency, unity, and determination to limit global warming and protect the most vulnerable amongst us.

Baku Dialogues:

This brings us to what in the world of COP is formally called the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage, an issue on which there was some progress at COP28 in Dubai, after there had been an agreement in principle at COP27 in Egypt—and the momentum for this had something integral to do with the Commonwealth, I believe.

Baroness Scotland:

Yes, COP28 was a significant milestone for our journey, which, as I said, for us in the Commonwealth, began 27 years ago. Now, back in June 2022, at the Commonwealth Heads

of Government meeting in Kigali, the 56 countries of the Commonwealth made a pledge: we said that we had to have a Loss and Damage Fund when we went to Sharm el Sheikh in Egypt for COP27 in November of that same year. We were told for decades that “You will never, ever get a Loss and Damage Fund.” I was told, “You are howling at the moon.”

Well, it looks as if howling at the moon works, because we got the agreement. It got established. And the world agreed last year when we went to Dubai for COP28—this is where the Fund received commitments of around \$700 million U.S. dollars—this is in no way enough, but it was a beginning.

So, at COP29 in Azerbaijan, we will be looking to see how we fill those gaps, and we will be looking to the practical response to the harsh reality that for so many communities, climate change has created damage which cannot be undone. The losses that we have suffered in part are irreversible—but there are others that we can fix.

Baku Dialogues:

This is all part of the broader climate finance conversation, which will be the negotiations centerpiece of COP29, as the Azerbaijani presidency has announced. What has the Commonwealth done to prepare its member states for talks on this critically important issue?

Baroness Scotland:

We've talked and talked about climate finance and now the real issue is how do we deliver it. No more talk, but delivery. And that burden therefore is heavy on Azerbaijan's shoulders, and it'll only be lifted if the whole world helps it to be lifted up, and that's going to take a lot of advocacy—a lot of push.

One of the things we're doing across the Commonwealth is that we are helping our countries to prepare for negotiations on

climate finance: we're helping to give them the ammunition—the data—that they're going to need. And we also have just developed and delivered an analysis of the performance of all the Commonwealth countries on the SDGs and on digital integration. So, in these two reports we can look for what works and what doesn't work. Because, I think what we have to do is target our efforts in a way that will maximize their support.

And because of the diversity of our membership—I said something about this earlier—you can look at the Commonwealth, and you will find someone who looks like you. If you're a European, and you're a big economy, you can look at the UK; if you're a European and you're a smaller economy, look at Malta or Cyprus. If you're from Africa you can know that the biggest country in Africa, which is Nigeria, is a part of the Commonwealth, but so is the smallest in Africa, and the richest countries in Africa—and not just in Africa—are there, but so are the poorest.

And if we can get an agreement with the rich the poor, the small, the indigenous—if our Commonwealth family can agree—then it usually means the world can agree. We did this with the Sustainable Development Goals. If you look at the SDGs, and you compare them to the Charter of the Commonwealth from 2012, you see that our 16 core beliefs, as enumerated in that document from 12 years ago. Those 16 became more or less SDG1 through SDG16—and then there was SDG17, which is all about partnership, and partnership is the Commonwealth's *raison d'être*. It's really at the core of our family, and that's why it's in our Charter's preamble.

Or look at what happened in Malta in late November 2015 at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. This was just a few days before the Paris COP. We came up with enforceability—the language we used was “mobilising global and national efforts to hold the increase in global average temperature below 2 or 1.5 degrees Celsius above

pre-industrial levels, to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and to achieve sustainable economic and technological transformation, both in mitigation and adaptation.” And look at what happened in Paris just a few days later: we got enforceability at 2.0 and 1.5. Another example involves comparing the outcome of our Kigali meeting in June 2022 and COP27 at Sharm el Sheikh in November regarding the Loss and Damage Fund—I talked about this earlier.

Again, the point is that every time the Commonwealth has been able to agree—and some people say it's like herding cats, okay, but once we get everyone to agree, it can happen at the global level. The whole world can then choose a pathway, because people can say, “Look there's someone in the Commonwealth who looks like me.” So, I'm determined.

Baku Dialogues:

And under your leadership, the Commonwealth has taken a number of concrete steps—it has launched a number of initiatives in this regard. We can mention the Blue Charter, CommonSensing, the Finance Access Hub, the Living Lands Charter, and so on. The logic behind all these is now part of the climate finance conversation, but also part of the conversation about sustainable development. The common thread here is a holistic approach—finding holistic, cross-cutting answers.

Baroness Scotland:

Yes, the Commonwealth has been working steadily and devotedly to come up with some of those answers. For instance, in 2018 we created, as you mentioned, the Commonwealth Blue Charter to deal with oceans—this works through ten Action Groups, each devoted to a particular ocean issue. And if you look at what has been done between 2018 and now, there is demonstrable empirical evidence that what we have done has made a difference.

For example, we have trained more than 640 government officials from over 50 Commonwealth countries and overseas territories. We have conducted coastal climate and blue economy rapid readiness assessments in seven countries, and, most notably, we've seen demonstrable progress in countries defining, planning, protecting, managing and developing their ocean spaces.

In one example, the Seychelles—a co-chair of our Marine Protected Areas Action Group, has launched an ambitious effort to protect the marine environment, resulting in the protection of 30 per cent of its marine area in 2020. So, we know that working together works.

Another example—this one is also from 2018: we created the CommonSensing project, which involves taking the geospatial data from the UK Space Agency ourselves, and with the help of a satellite services entity called Catapult, we're sharing it with small states. So that they could improve evidence-based decisionmaking in disaster preparedness and response, and they can gain greater access to climate change adaptation and mitigation finance.

The Commonwealth provided technical assistance to support Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands to use the CommonSensing platform, and they have used it for enhanced access to international climate finance as well as decisionmaking in areas like increased food security and disaster risk mitigation.

We also created the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub to help small and developing countries make better applications, because many of the applications were not succeeding because they didn't have the data—they didn't have the empirical evidence; they knew what they needed, but how could they prove it? And what we've done with the Climate Finance Access Hub is that we put advisers to work, shoulder-to-shoulder with governments in our small states, and with just

about \$8 million of initial capital, we have already delivered more than \$360 million into the hands of our small states, and we've got \$500 million more in the pipeline.

And it's sustainable: we have trained close to 3,000 government officials and they are now better able to write these proposals and to manage those projects. Just recently, we helped the Kingdom of Tonga to receive \$23 million in funding for a coastal resilience project, in Solomon Islands we helped to secure funding for a set of electric buses that will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and in Zambia, farmers are going to benefit from a solar-powered water supply system to help them combat drought. That's just a few of the ways the Commonwealth is working with countries to make a difference.

So, we're thinking now, in the context of COP29, what if we could put a climate finance advisor in every country that needed it? What if we could continue to share that data about what works and what doesn't work with each other? What if at COP29 we could find the money to deliver that advisory service at no cost to the countries that need it, because we know it would make a real difference?

And, like I said, we have a track record of success, because we had dealt with oceans, which had been neglected, with our Blue Charter, and then we turned to CommonSensing, which was atmosphere. Right? But what were we doing about land?

Remember, we have the three Rio conventions—everybody has signed up to those three Rio conventions: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and the UNFCCC. But what were we actually doing to come together? And, therefore, in 2022 we created—with the support of three UN agencies—we created the Commonwealth Living Lands Charter to turn rhetoric into action.

I want to get into this in a little more detail. Water is one of the major issues that we're looking at in the context of the

Living Lands Charter, because water will become the new gold; how we use water—how we can serve it, how we develop appropriate measures in relation to it—is critical.

We're bringing Action Groups together to understand not just what we should and must do, but actually also what we should *not* do, because there are a number of things that we need to never do again; and we need to share that data to enable it to work. The issue in relation to water, but also in relation to sustainable urban planning—sustainable *urbanization*, which is something that His Majesty the King has been moving on—and smart villages reflects this: we have to make sure that urban development is symbiotically attuned to rural development.

At the moment, you have like a gaping chasm between the two of them, and yet we have to have a holistic approach, as you mentioned. So, the Commonwealth has been advocating a regenerative approach to sustainable development, which enables us to really look holistically at how we deliver change, because one of the worrying things is that we tend to look at it on a silo basis. So, you can't actually look at urban development unless you really understand the impact it will have on rural development. So, urban and rural have to go hand in hand.

Baku Dialogues:

But it's more than adopting a holistic approach, isn't it? You have to have the right people in the right seats, don't you?

Baroness Scotland:

That's right. And we have been doing quite a lot of that sort of thing—this is very important. Let me give you an example. One of the first things I did within the first one hundred days of becoming Secretary-General was that we brought together everyone—because what I discovered was that oceanologists only seemed to talk to oceanologists, climatologists only talked to

climatologists, and then there were those who were doing circular economy and symbiotic economy and urban development and rural development. But nobody was talking together.

So, we brought everybody together—under one umbrella—for three days, and we locked the doors—in effect—and we had some of the brightest and best people in the world on these subjects reasoning together. And instead of talking *at* each other, they talked *with* each other to come up with solutions. At the end of that, we came to the view that we needed this regenerative approach to sustainable development in order to reverse climate change.

Regenerative development and a holistic approach. And within that holistic approach, we have water and urbanization as part of the solution; but these cannot be separated from the other bits because if we develop in silos, we won't get the solutions that we need. This is a new multidisciplinary approach, and I think we need a new form of education.

Before the Industrial Revolution, there was a real concentration on developing polymaths: people who are multifaceted, multi-skilled, and multidisciplinary. And you can think of some of the greatest polymaths like Michelangelo and all the other greats: they were not single-issue experts. And then we had the onset of the Industrial Revolution, which made us focus on separate specializations that were targeted to deliver on a mechanized-specific era.

Our world has now changed radically, and we are back in an era where we need polymaths again. And we need to understand the interdisciplinary nature of everything we're doing, and yet our universities and our schools are still educating our young people as if the Industrial Revolution is still the paradigm in which we live. The way we teach our young people has to change, because we have to teach them that collaboration and partnership in whatever they do is a fundamental part of what they need to undertake if they want to have successful conclusions.

So, yes, to come back full circle to what you asked me: Blue Charter, CommonSensing, Climate Finance Access Hub, Living Lands Charter, regenerative development—all these should be part of a holistic approach. But that's not all. Because then we thought, what if we can fund those Action Groups now—with the money that comes out and which is identified and raised at COP29 in Azerbaijan? Think about the difference we can make.

Baku Dialogues:

Yes, and making sure this is reflected in educating young people in a holistic way, which is something we are trying to do at ADA University—and this is something that we see more and more in universities around the world. But there is another issue that the Commonwealth has also played an increasingly important role in bringing more into the mainstream of the global conversation, and that's debt reduction. You touched briefly on this earlier, but let's get into it a bit more. Might the Commonwealth's experience also be taken into account in the COP29 discussions, in the context of climate finance?

Baroness Scotland:

Yes, we're also looking at debt. We have something called Commonwealth Meridian, which is our debt recording and management system. The Meridian system is managing more than \$2.5 trillion of debt, which is really a burden for some of the least developed and most dangerously affected people. This software is used in 39 countries and allows government officials a powerful tool to monitor liabilities closely, make evidence-based decisions, and ensure that national financing requirements are met effectively and balanced with acceptable risk levels.

So, all those things I mentioned are things that we have done, but they're also things that we can continue to do together on a larger scale, not just in the context of the Commonwealth.

And it helps us, I think, to build the confidence that the COP process can continue to yield a genuine meaningful process and progress.

Many of our small states are, frankly, tired of coming to annual COP meetings and fighting and talking and not being heard. The hope for them is if they come to Baku for COP29 they will be heard there will be hope, and that this hope will be justified, and we will together be able to change things.

Some of these countries have already travelled to Baku to meet with the COP29 presidency, or have had meetings with the COP29 presidency in Bonn and elsewhere. And so that's why I am unreserved in my applause for what Azerbaijan is trying to do, and I applaud the stewardship that Azerbaijan has demonstrated—on topics ranging from adaptation to mitigation, and now through the Loss and Damage Fund and so on, that address the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

Baku Dialogues:

You seem to be suggesting an “all-of the-above” approach to climate finance and, more, broadly, to combatting climate change.

Baroness Scotland:

We must leave no stone unturned in this quest for sustainability. It's actually our quest for life on our planet. If we don't do this—if our generation doesn't do this—then the next generation won't have that opportunity. And they will ask us, “What did you do?” Because they will know that we knew what the future held: the generation before ours can say “I didn't understand, I didn't know.” But we cannot say this, because, well, we *do* know.

So, the question we're all having to ask each other—and ourselves first—is “What am *I* going to do?” This applies to

one and all, including young people—I keep coming back to this point. It’s not just “What is the ambassador going to do?” and “What is my government going to do” and “What are others going to do?” It really is “What am *I* going to do?”

This is what I know. I know it starts with each of us.

Baku Dialogues:

And it also involves working together—all of us, like you’ve said, on a whole host of issues. One that’s on the minds of many Azerbaijanis is smart villages and smart cities. Azerbaijan has pledged to achieve net-zero carbon emissions in its liberated areas by 2050, as outlined in its latest national climate action plan—the NDC. Building smart villages and smart cities is integral to this endeavor. The country’s leadership has pledged to transform Karabakh into a Green Energy Zone—the vanguard region in this respect for the country. In other parts of the world, the Commonwealth has done a lot of work on this, hasn’t it?

Baroness Scotland:

There’s no reason why we can’t work together on smart cities and smart villages, because they’re really, really important: we see that having a regenerative approach to development—I mentioned this earlier: a regenerative approach to development will really have a massive impact in reducing greenhouse gases. A few months ago, we published UC Berkeley Professor Solomon Darwin’s toolkit, which was devised with us on how you create a smart village.

A smart village prioritizes local knowledge and sustainable skills, but harnesses technology to improve lives and livelihoods. Professor Darwin’s toolkit demonstrates how artificial intelligence can be used to improve the livelihoods of rural villages and communities and provides practical opportunities for about 3.4 billion citizens globally who live in these areas.

Now, many smart villages in India are the size of cities in other countries; and some of them are the size of whole countries that belong to the Commonwealth, because we’ve got countries such as Nauru, which has only about 10,000 people.

Building these kinds of toolkits to enable people to help people to do it better is really, really important. So, there are huge opportunities, I think, to work together.

Artificial Intelligence is another critically important area. It’s anticipated that AI and digital creativity will add about \$15.7 trillion to the world’s economy by 2030—that’s exponential growth. AI has the ability to transform almost every single aspect of the work we do. So, we’ll be able to collate data more easily aggregated and are able to also disaggregate it. We will be able to bring together disciplines that are now disparate—merging those datasets—and we will be able to formulate solutions much more quickly.

In health, for example, they think that the computations—some of which would take about 100 years without AI—now could be distilled and be undertaken in a matter of months. Some other calculations, powered by AI, could be done in a matter of weeks, others in days, others in seconds.

My point is that AI is a real technological revolution—and it’s one unlike any we’ve seen before. And we in the Commonwealth understood that earlier than most, and we have been working on digitalization and development since about 2018.

Now, for some strange and quite extraordinary reason, in 2023 I was—to my surprise—given a Global Leadership award by UC Berkeley. The award, they said, was in recognition of my exceptional championing of innovation and use of technology to expand markets around the world and empower people at the bottom of the pyramid.

While there, I went to Silicon Valley and was able to speak to all of the big tech companies, including NVIDIA, Ericsson,

Intel, and so on. What we have done together is that the Commonwealth has launched an AI consortium, which brought all the big tech companies together to see how we can craft a bridge across the digital divide between the global north and the global south.

Baku Dialogues:

Yes, this question of the technological divide. It's akin in some ways to the climate finance debate, in the sense that the 'have nots' say, in effect, "we must not be left behind. And we need help, because we can't afford to do it ourselves."

Baroness Scotland:

That's right: if nothing is done—if we don't bridge that technological divide—there will be many countries who will be left behind. For AI really to do that which it can do, everyone has to have access to it—as opposed to only some of us having access. So, with Intel, for example, we've created an open-source learning platform for leaders so they can better understand the good things about AI. Now, obviously, there are also bad things about AI—which is why we need to imbue AI with our values: the valueless application of AI could actually be very detrimental to our world.

And we've just launched this open-source data learning platform—the Commonwealth AI Academy—in which there are six different courses that young people can take. I'm absolutely determined that young people—there are more than 1.5 billion young people in our Commonwealth, as I've mentioned—and everyone, really, has access to AI, and I want people not to be afraid of AI, but to see AI just like another tool, albeit a very powerful one.

I sometimes think AI is like a scalpel: if you put a scalpel in the hands of a thoracic surgeon, he or she will save many lives; if

you put the same scalpel in the hands of a thug, then he or she can take lives. Either way, it's not the scalpel's fault. It's the fault of the one who wields it. And so, we have to create the rules that will mandate it to be wielded with care, with devotion, and, I would say, with love.

Sure, AI is going to radically change our lives, and the lives of young people more than anyone else's. But also, I think we need to be the creators of AI, as opposed to being just the consumers of AI. If we master this new technology—if we retain mastery over this new technology—then our world could be a much safer place.

Baku Dialogues:

There is so much more we could talk about, but it's time to bring this conversation to a close. Thank you—truly—for this wide-ranging interview. We're grateful for your time and your engagement. We look forward to welcoming you back to ADA University—to Baku. We hope to see you again soon.

Baroness Scotland:

Thank you very much, indeed. I hope to be back soon. **BD**

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