

Background Note for the Royal Commonwealth Society Conference
“A Commonwealth of Governments and Peoples: A New Partnership?”
30 October 2002, 08:45-13:15

The Commonwealth has a long civil society history. It is distinguished from many other inter-governmental organisations in also having a rich variety of non-governmental organisations dedicated to working for its citizens and in partnership with governments. Some of these organisations, starting with the Royal Commonwealth Society, have been in existence longer than the modern Commonwealth itself or the establishment of its inter-governmental agencies.

The non-governmental Commonwealth has been a sustained facet of the modern association and has helped shape the notion of the Commonwealth as an organisation not just of states, but of peoples. This has had many ramifications for the Commonwealth's structures and programmes, for example in the initiative to establish an inter-governmental agency to work with civil society, or in the practice of maintaining links with a country's civil society when its government has been suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth.

At the start of the new millennium there are upwards of ninety non-governmental organisations with a specific or general interest in the Commonwealth, on top of the plethora of civil society organisations working within and between Commonwealth countries at a local, national, regional or international level. The UNDP Human Development Report 2002 estimates that by 1996 there were more than one million domestic non-profit organisations in India alone.

Many of the Commonwealth-interest organisations, as well as a number of other civil society organisations, have interacted with official Commonwealth inter-governmental agencies (particularly the Commonwealth Foundation) in a fluid way since the 1960s. Relationships have been of many hues, and have included official Commonwealth funding of civil society organisations, civil society service provision as part of Commonwealth programmes, networking and information sharing between civil society and Commonwealth officials, and civil society lobbying of official Commonwealth positions.

In the early 1990s the official Commonwealth sought to formalise its relations with the non-governmental sector and in 1992 created a desk for non-governmental organisations within the Commonwealth Secretariat. The next year the Commonwealth offered accreditation to non-governmental organisations, with Commonwealth in their name and with pan-Commonwealth governance and programmes, for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Cyprus. This is a formula that has remained in place to the present day.

The Edinburgh CHOGM of 1997 saw the first attempt by civil society to bring its voice to the Commonwealth summit through a Commonwealth Centre (organised by the RCS) running parallel to the official summit meetings. Commonwealth Peoples' Centres (CPCs) have since become part of the official CHOGM scene, alongside Commonwealth Business and Youth Fora, and were organised in Durban (1999) and Brisbane (2001) involving accredited organisations and many local groups. A week-long Commonwealth Peoples' Festival, organised by the Commonwealth Foundation, with the theme “Connecting Communities” was held for the first time in Brisbane, despite the postponement of the 2001 CHOGM in that city. Other attempts at

civil society involvement in official Commonwealth meetings, have taken place at the ministerial level in the form of open plenary sessions, free access to the media, pre-meeting civil society events to prioritise agenda setting, the solicitation of NGO submissions, and consultations between NGOs and officials.

The report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group (HLRG) into the future of the association, presented to Heads of Government at Coolum in March 2002, identified the strengthening of links between the official and unofficial Commonwealth as a priority. Areas flagged for action, and to be addressed at the Commonwealth Secretariat's Board of Governors Meeting in December 2002, included: the Commonwealth's accreditation procedure, co-ordination between the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Foundation, and Commonwealth relations with young people.

In the light of the emphasis placed on official/unofficial Commonwealth relations by the HLRG report, the challenge for the official Commonwealth is to find creative ways to operationalise this desire to work more closely with civil society. This includes finding answers to questions such as

- how to sensitise staff and develop a culture conducive to meaningful, not cosmetic, civil society participation
- how to support and to build on the capacity of civil society organisations to enable them to work as effective partners
- how to engage with civil society organisations whose own aims or ways of working differ from those of the official Commonwealth
- how to encourage a broad spectrum of voices to be heard from all corners and sectors of the Commonwealth
- how to ensure the voices of civil society are heard during the process of decision-making and not just when decisions are being implemented.

Such a process also asks questions of Commonwealth civil society, principally: what type of interaction does *it* want with the official Commonwealth? The answer may differ from organisation to organisation depending on its area of activity, location, finances, size or outlook. If civil society organisations desire greater co-ordination with official Commonwealth agencies, they in turn will need to evaluate their expectations of the roles, processes and outcomes such a change in relations will bring, as well as considering how best to forge stronger links, both with the official Commonwealth and other sectors of Commonwealth civil society such as business and the media, whilst retaining their character and independence.

The rationale for this half-day conference is to give an opportunity for Commonwealth civil society organisations, officials and High Commissions to consider their responses to these, and other, questions in the run up to the Board of Governors' Meeting and preparatory events organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation

Amanda Shah, CPSU Project Officer, Commonwealth Civil Society Project