

**“Commonwealth Civil Society After Coolum”**  
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Paper from Amanda Shah, Project Officer, CPSU

Coolum Australia was host to the Commonwealth Heads of Government in March, for their first meeting since the Durban summit of November 1999. As a rump of the postponed Brisbane event, cancelled in October 2001 following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the focus in Coolum was on the Heads’ retreat with limited NGO facilities or activity. Nevertheless civil society did not altogether escape attention.

Out of the key official documents coming out of the CHOGM - the Coolum Communiqué, the Coolum Declaration and the report of the High Level Review Group (HLRG) - all but the Communiqué made reference to Commonwealth civil society. Amidst much talk about terrorism in the summit documents, there was also a noticeable emphasis on the promotion of Commonwealth principles, as enunciated in the Singapore, Harare, Edinburgh and Fancourt Declarations, and a call for the involvement of different parts of the Commonwealth “family” in promoting the Commonwealth and realising its values.

The Coolum Declaration called,

“on the many intergovernmental, professional and civil society bodies which help to implement our Commonwealth values to join with us [member states] in building closer Commonwealth family links and strengthening consultation and collaboration”

and this call was taken up by the report of the ten Heads of State chaired by President Mbeki that made up the High Level Review Group. The Group dedicated the final section of its report to “People to People Links: The Commonwealth’s Civil Society.” Amongst their analysis and recommendations, the Review Group

- stated that the large number of officially recognised pan-Commonwealth organisations give the Commonwealth a unique depth and reach,
- recommended the strengthening of links between the official and unofficial Commonwealth to give Commonwealth activities greater impact,
- asked the Secretary General and Director of the Commonwealth Foundation to discuss with interested Commonwealth non-governmental organisations how they could best be organised into focus groups to better interact with the Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies,
- asked the Secretary General to consult with member governments (no mention of consultation with civil society) and propose a set of sound and consistent criteria for the accreditation of pan-Commonwealth NGOs to ministerial meetings and CHOGMs, and
- suggested that where feasible Commonwealth governments should designate specific Commonwealth Centres to promote and publicise the Commonwealth and its fundamental principles.

Broadly speaking these are the areas that the Commonwealth Civil Society project at the CPSU has chosen to focus its policy research upon, areas that can be boiled down to an

examination of relations between the official and unofficial Commonwealth, and the role of the People's Commonwealth in promoting the organisation and its values.

I would like to concentrate on looking at specific angles of interest for civil society after Coolum as a result of the steer given by the HLRG report for increased co-ordination between the official and unofficial Commonwealth, particularly the Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies and the Commonwealth's accreditation procedure. However, first, having heard what the official Commonwealth's view about civil society at Coolum, lets get a snapshot about what the unofficial Commonwealth has to say on the matter.

Unsurprisingly the Peoples' Commonwealth has not been silent in voicing its opinion of the Commonwealth and its attitude to civil society. Back in 1991 in its first report to Heads of Government, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), the only NGO with a remit solely to work on human rights in the Commonwealth, was calling for "governments not to view NGOs as elements hostile to government, but as potential allies," and recommended that in any mechanisms for human rights protection set up within the Commonwealth framework "standing for NGOs should be built into its procedure."

More recent civil society statements include the Commonwealth Peoples' Communiqué issued at the end of the Brisbane Peoples' Festival, that went on regardless of the last minute pull-out by Heads of Government, and which included a section on the role of civil society. A particularly pertinent section of the Communiqué reads that,

"civil society, including community groups, faith groups, advocates for social causes, NGOs, those working to connect communities, and professional associations demand a place at the decision-making table."

It goes on to "urge Heads of Government to recognise civil society as an essential manifestation of democracy and allow meaningful civil society participation at the domestic level and within the institutional mechanisms of the Commonwealth." The Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) also used the Brisbane non-CHOGM to float their declaration on civil society and poverty reduction which is "designed to encourage civil society organisations [and to] bring new energy and purpose to partnerships between civil society and governments." It challenges that "one factor, perhaps the most important one, which does and will continue to define the Commonwealth is that it is an area in which civil societies are free to flourish – thereby giving real meaning to the concept of *commonwealth*." At Coolum, feeling that their views had not been adequately listened to by the HLRG despite an invitation to make submissions and two consultations, individuals from Commonwealth organisations delivered "A New Vision for the Commonwealth." One of the three overarching themes underpinning the report is a belief that "part of the answer...lies in building better partnerships between the official and unofficial Commonwealth in the delivery of its priority programmes."

It is clear that the attention of the official Commonwealth on civil society in the HLRG coupled with the continued efforts of Commonwealth civil society to raise the issue on the Commonwealth agenda makes the examination of official/unofficial Commonwealth

relations particularly timely. But on a practical level what should the Commonwealth be doing to act upon the Coolum civil society recommendations?

### **Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies**

The HLRG recommended in paragraph 45.10 of its report that the Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies (CCCA) be reconstituted from an existing committee - the Apia Committee, previously the Commonwealth Agencies Consultative Committee - "to improve co-ordination and co-operation among Commonwealth agencies." This Committee is to be chaired by the Secretary-General and is to include a membership of the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation, Commonwealth of Learning, the Chairs of the Secretariat's Board of Governors and its Executive Committee (i.e. Commonwealth High Commissions in London) and other pan-Commonwealth bodies as well as NGOs. It was further recommended in paragraph 49.1 of the HRLG report that Commonwealth civil society should be organised into focus groups based on functional interests to enhance co-ordination with the official Commonwealth and interact with the CCCA.

The CCCA meets for the first time on 28 June 2002 and the CPSU Commonwealth Civil Society project as well as other NGOs have presented submissions to the Committee offering advice on how it should engage with civil society. A brief run down of the issues highlighted in the CPSU submission to the CCCA, that are of relevance to the wider Commonwealth, starts with the point that civil society is not solely made up of pan-Commonwealth NGOs. Too often the official Commonwealth treats the 69 accredited pan-Commonwealth NGO as if they are civil society. The organisation considers that when it has interacted with pan-Commonwealth NGOs it has engaged with Commonwealth civil society. This is not the case.

Pan-Commonwealth NGOs are hugely important assets to the Commonwealth and demonstrate a level of commitment and specificity towards Commonwealth issues not easily found in other quarters. Nevertheless for varying reasons pan-Commonwealth NGOs cannot claim to represent the totality of activity or interests undertaken by the Commonwealth's civil society. A cursory examination reveals that in a Commonwealth where a third live on less than \$1 a day and the majority of citizens live in South Asia, pan-Commonwealth NGOs - with a strong leaning towards the professions, over representation in the UK (in London and even in the 0207 phone code) and patchy pan-Commonwealth presence - are not definitive of Commonwealth civil society. In its submission to the CCCA the project argues that whilst enhancing its important links with pan-Commonwealth NGOs the Commonwealth needs to allow participation by a more diverse set of civil society actors to better hear the voices of its citizens and benefit from their experience, resources and knowledge.

Secondly, the organs of the official Commonwealth must embody good governance. The official Commonwealth must demonstrate the organisation's fundamental principles within its institutional mechanisms. It is not enough for declarations to be produced calling for member states to adhere to the Harare principles, the Commonwealth must demonstrate compliance to the organisation's values in its daily activities and this

includes a commitment to participation. The disparity that arises between what the Commonwealth urges of its member states and the practice of its institutional mechanisms ultimately weakens the Commonwealth's message. This is doubly so within the context of contemporary debates on global good governance that recognises the important involvement of different sector stakeholders in decision-making processes. As an open demonstration of the Commonwealth's commitment to internalising good governance principles the CPSU submission recommends that the CCCA should, with its civil society membership, draft guidelines for civil society participation with the official Commonwealth to provide a minimum baseline upon which Commonwealth officials are required to engage with the unofficial Commonwealth.

Thirdly, in order for the Commonwealth to better co-ordinate its activities, the official organs of the organisation must develop a culture of participation. Such a culture does not exist in any uniform institutional fashion in the Commonwealth at present. In part this is the result of recruitment practices that favour those of governmental background who may bring with them particular, and not necessarily positive, views of civil society. More needs to be done to train new Commonwealth officials in order to cultivate a new attitude to Commonwealth civil society that is positive, open and partnership-based. Most importantly it is suggested that for a campaign towards the development of a participatory culture to work, it must be spearheaded from the very highest levels and should be championed by the Secretary-General and his office in co-ordination with Strategic Planning and Evaluation Unit.

### **Accreditation**

Part of the creation of a more open culture towards civil society within the official Commonwealth has to be a re-visitation of the organisation's accreditation procedure. Set up for the 1993 Limassol CHOGM, accreditation was a breakthrough in creating a system for the official recognition of NGOs in the Commonwealth. However as the HLRG has suggested it is time to think afresh on accreditation.

The current criteria for accreditation are two-fold: that an organisation should have Commonwealth in its name and that it should have pan-Commonwealth programmes and governance. The only exceptions to this are the Royal Over-Seas League and the organisation representing the national NGOs of the country hosting the CHOGM e.g. SANGOCO in 1999. Whilst the increasing number of organisation's seeking accreditation is testimony to its relevancy, the current process categorises the Commonwealth with the UN pre-1992 before the opening up of the UN system at the Rio Earth Summit. It is also dubiously adhered to: the majority of accredited organisations would struggle to offer truly pan-Commonwealth representation many settle for a regional presence often with representational gaps in the Caribbean or Pacific. Furthermore it has proved impossible to regulate the use of the word "Commonwealth" as the organisation has no legal control over it.

A layered approach to accreditation would allow for a more flexible attitude to national and regional level organisations wishing to involve themselves further in the work of the Commonwealth. Suggestions fielded during the course of this research have included a

two tiered system, with one tier being a re-worked version of the existing accreditation but for accreditation to the Commonwealth rather than CHOGMs, and a scaled down accreditation process around Commonwealth meetings for the many focus specific, or national level organisations, who wish to work with the Commonwealth on specific occasions. The Commonwealth could also consider the approach of the OAS which based its accreditation system on that of the UN's ECOSOC on the premise that its members had already agreed it within the UN system.

A revamping of the existing accreditation process into accreditation to the Commonwealth (rather than merely to CHOGMs) could form the basis of a Commonwealth NGO Kitemark. A symbol that all organisations accredited at this level would be able to use alongside their own logo. Not only would this bring added publicity for the Commonwealth "brand" but it would act as a symbol of excellence for NGOs that could grow in recognition and help lever support from other international organisations as well as international funders.

To sum up, it is clear that the Coolum CHOGM and the documents produced by Heads of Government at the summit have presented an opportunity for the Commonwealth to bring itself up to speed in its relations to Commonwealth civil society. To do this will require co-operation by the official and unofficial Commonwealth in a spirit of partnership. It will also need both facets of the modern Commonwealth to ask hard questions of themselves and their role in facilitating increased engagement. The Commonwealth is proud to tell the world that one of the things that makes it different – one of its "comparative advantages" – is its people and their organisations. Now is the time for action in translating these sentiments into a more effective practical reality. I hope that some of the points highlighted in this paper will go some way to making suggestions about how this practical change can occur.