

# SURVIVAL OF THE YOUNGEST

## PAN-COMMONWEALTH NGOs AND THE YOUNGER GENERATION

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*The Commonwealth has a long acknowledged problem attracting and retaining the interest of young people and has run a designated youth programme for three decades. However, at the start of the new millennium the organization seems no nearer to successfully addressing the challenge of how to remain relevant to new generations of Commonwealth citizens. In trying to transform apathy about the Commonwealth among younger people, the association has generally not sought, nor been offered, the active assistance of the 69 accredited pan-Commonwealth non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that make up a key part of the unofficial Peoples' Commonwealth. This article analyses how these organizations could work to increase youth interest, not just in the Commonwealth as a concept and as an organization, but in their own work. The article concludes that, without an assessment of youth needs and interests, a number of pan-Commonwealth NGOs face diminishing members, or even extinction, within a generation, something that could be a precursor to the fate of the Commonwealth itself unless political will, better cross-sector resource mobilization and creative thinking are all fused together.*

*Key words:* Commonwealth; young people; NGOs; youth; civil society.

**A** SOCIETY THAT CUTS ITSELF OFF from its youth severs its life-line. But a society that engages their interests, enlists their talents, and liberates their energies brings hope to the entire world. (Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations)<sup>1</sup>

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The Commonwealth has a serious health problem that is not going away or getting any better. At the start of the twenty-first century the organization is still viewed as inconsequential to a vast number of its young people. For many years it has been clear that the Commonwealth is not registering strongly on the radar screen of young people's interests, despite two-thirds of Commonwealth citizens being under 29 years of age.<sup>2</sup> This article proposes that one of the reasons the Commonwealth has not captured the imagination of young people is that, by and large, excepting the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council (CYEC) which is dedicated to youth work, the unofficial, or non-governmental, Commonwealth has not joined in the campaign to attract youth interest. It goes on to suggest that it is only by each organization (whether official or unofficial) taking appropriate steps to address the needs of young people through their work, that the Commonwealth's current generational decline can be decisively reversed and the association enriched by the contribution of its younger citizens.

Successive governmental and non-governmental exercises over the years have identified lack of interest among youth as one of the association's perennial problems.<sup>3</sup> A series of St Catherine's Conferences for young Commonwealth citizens, held throughout the 1990s at Cumberland Lodge, provided useful snapshots of the sustained antipathy of younger generations to the Commonwealth. Successive conference participants characterized the Commonwealth as 'elitist', 'non-participatory', 'not action oriented', and 'dwelling too much on the past'.

Back in 1994 a conference for young British citizens reported that, 'there is a serious lack of awareness by young people in Britain including the intelligent and well educated about the Commonwealth, its activities and potential'.<sup>4</sup> At a further conference the next year for young Commonwealth professionals 'it was evident that in general amongst the young there prevails a negative stereotype of the Commonwealth which connects it with the imperial past and which sees it as British-centred, patronising and exclusive'.<sup>5</sup> As recently as 2001 young conference participants asked what was apparently a rhetorical question for many—'if membership of the Commonwealth was open to people rather than to states, how many would join?'—and observed that, while the Commonwealth needs the new generation, the new generation does not necessarily need the Commonwealth. During this conference, the conference report tells us, the atmosphere was that of 'suppressed anger ... at Marlborough House [supporting] a kind of deference ... to youth which is not translated into action' and participants concluded in their post-conference resolutions that 'the Commonwealth has lost its edge'.<sup>6</sup> All in all these conference reports make for pretty damning reading for the Commonwealth, which is perhaps surprising considering the strong familial ties that continue to link many young people across different member states. Two-thirds of UK primary school children, for example, have at least second cousins in other Commonwealth countries.<sup>7</sup>

The one aspect of Commonwealth activity regularly known and cared about by young people is the quadrennial Commonwealth Games. However, as the 1997 *Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Information Programmes* recognized: 'The trouble is that [the Games] has become just about the only aspect of the Commonwealth the young knows about ... the problem is how to

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use the newspeg of the Games during the run-up to draw attention to other activities of the Commonwealth'; this is something that even the hugely successful 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester had mixed success in doing.<sup>8</sup> The *Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group*, presented to Heads of Government at the Coolum summit five years on from the Secretariat's *Review*, concurred that 'the pursuit of excellence in sport at the Games also helps to inspire and engage the attention of young people in all parts of the Commonwealth',<sup>9</sup> yet it failed to offer ideas about how to translate this Commonwealth crowd-puller into a more sustained interest.

The other strong pulse of the Commonwealth—the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs)—has continually failed to result in more than the smallest ripples of youth interest. One reason for this is the shrouded nature of Commonwealth summits, which are not attractive to younger people who, understandably, are more interested in events and organizations that they can actually get involved in. CHOGMs, on the other hand, do a good job at keeping all civil society participants at arm's length, whether they are aged 16 or 76. There has been a parallel youth event organized around CHOGMs since 1997, by CYEC and other youth organizations in partnership with the official Commonwealth, but as with all parallel fora, it is often difficult to see their tangible impact on summits.<sup>10</sup> The biggest interest shown by young people in CHOGMs has been through the peaceful anti-globalization protests planned before the postponed 2001 CHOGM in Brisbane, where alliances of citizens and their organizations formed under banners such as 'CHOGM-Free Zone', 'StopCHOGM' and 'CHOGM Action Network'.<sup>11</sup>

### **Joining up the Commonwealth?**

So what has the Commonwealth been doing about its biggest survival issue? Thirty years ago, in 1974, the official Commonwealth established a designated youth programme to work for 'a world where young women and men (15–29 years) can reach their full potential. Where they can use their creativity and skills as productive members of their societies. That means having control over their own lives.'<sup>12</sup> The Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) is coordinated from the Commonwealth Secretariat in London but has attempted to increase its reach by establishing four regional Centres in Chandigarh, Georgetown, Lusaka and Queensland.<sup>13</sup> In Commonwealth terms it is unique in promoting youth participation in its governance structures both at a regional and pan-Commonwealth level, so that the chair of the Commonwealth Youth Caucus holds a seat with equal speaking rights to ministers at the triennial Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meetings. Since coming to the job in April 2000, Don McKinnon has also used his role as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth to highlight the importance placed by the association on young people: 'I have made a point of meeting young people on almost every trip I have made to member countries and will continue to do so, because the concerns of youth today are the agenda of the Commonwealth tomorrow.'<sup>14</sup>

At the 2002 Commonwealth summit in Coolum the official Commonwealth's approach to youth issues was given new direction with the Commonwealth Youth for the Future (YFF) Initiative. The initiative, a decentralized programme

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open to all Commonwealth members, citizens and organizations, concentrates on youth enterprise development, youth volunteering, youth mentoring and youth leadership. Largely an Australian brainchild, it sets a new agenda for the Commonwealth's youth policies, yet at the time of writing, nearly a year on from Coolum, the conceptualization of YFF and how it could be operationalized within resource limitations and the capacity of CYP, have yet to be thought out. The website for the Initiative is still being developed. With little participation, top-down implementation, no youth input, no attempt to rationalize it against current CYP work programmes and little political will to resource it, YFF at present appears to be marked by many of the traits that have led to young peoples' apathy towards all things Commonwealth. It also suggests that the official Commonwealth has yet to seriously prioritize youth involvement as its pressing problem.

The valuable work of CYP, and efforts to breathe life into the nascent YFF, continue. Yet with its limited professional staff (15 people across the Commonwealth) and resources (£2 223 850 for 2000–01),<sup>15</sup> it is clear that, in itself, this official programme is not the answer to the Commonwealth's continuing struggle to attract the interest of young people. The Commonwealth Secretariat's 1997 *Review* recommended that it was the responsibility of all those involved with the Commonwealth in its different manifestations (governmental, non-governmental, semi-governmental, business, etc) to promote the Commonwealth through their work: 'every Commonwealth meeting whether official or NGO ... is an opportunity to promote the Commonwealth not only to the local media but also among the delegates themselves ... It should be a rule at every Commonwealth event that delegates are first given a briefing about the Commonwealth itself—hopefully with some topical touches to make it really interesting—and then given a kit on the Commonwealth to take home.'<sup>16</sup> This call was recently taken up in a draft policy paper to the Commonwealth Secretariat's Board of Governors, written by the Secretariat's Communications and Public Affairs Division, which suggests that 'it is increasingly understood that promotion of the Commonwealth is an integral job of every single person who works for the association and believes in its values. It is not a task that can be left to any one Secretariat division.'<sup>17</sup>

The official and unofficial Commonwealth are locked together in their battles for relevance and survival in the twenty-first century; they will stand or die together. If the Commonwealth is truly an association of peoples and of states, there can be no successful network of pan-Commonwealth non-governmental organizations if the intergovernmental Commonwealth (as a concept) has been discredited. Likewise, the intergovernmental Commonwealth can be no more than a talking shop for its members' governmental elite without the support of its unofficial component. What is being suggested is a responsibility upon all members of the Commonwealth family to review their individual and collective efforts to engage young people.

### **The Peoples' Commonwealth**

But what is this Peoples' Commonwealth and why could it be of use in engaging young people with the Commonwealth? Simply put, the Peoples'

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Commonwealth—known interchangeably as the unofficial Commonwealth, the non-governmental Commonwealth or Commonwealth civil society—is the collection of non-governmental organizations that work around the Commonwealth on issues of concern to the Commonwealth’s 1.7 billion citizens. It is often erroneously understood to be the 69 pan-Commonwealth non-governmental organizations that have accredited status to Commonwealth summits, ie those that have Commonwealth in their title and have pan-Commonwealth governance structures and operations. However, when we talk about Commonwealth civil society in an era when there are over one million non-profit organizations operating in India alone,<sup>18</sup> it is obvious that the 69 organizations currently recognized by the Commonwealth are just the tip of the iceberg. There are literally millions of organizations working within and between countries of the Commonwealth at a local, national or regional level. Many Commonwealth officials already work with a number of these organizations, but at the time of writing they are not officially recognized by the association as a whole.<sup>19</sup> Realistically, the majority of civil society organizations in the Commonwealth have no real interest in interacting with the official Commonwealth, something which has protected, and is likely to continue to protect, the Commonwealth from the signs of ‘demosclerosis’<sup>20</sup> experienced by the United Nations.<sup>21</sup> With these constraints and realities in mind, it is clear that the 69 accredited pan-Commonwealth organizations with a specific interest in the Commonwealth have a particular rôle to play in the regeneration of the association (and by connection, themselves).

The activities of the pan-Commonwealth organizations are wide-ranging, but fall into a number of major clusters:

- built environment;
- Commonwealth friendship/promotion/service;
- education;
- environment;
- good governance;
- health;
- human rights and development;
- law;
- media;
- religion;
- the private sector;
- youth.<sup>22</sup>

Three-quarters of them (52 organizations) base their secretariats in the UK, leaving only a quarter (17 organizations) headquartered in the other 53 countries of the Commonwealth.<sup>23</sup> These include the Commonwealth Library Association (based in Jamaica—the first to headquarter in a developing member state), the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (headquartered in India and with offices in the UK and Ghana), and, shortly, the Commonwealth Journalists Association (moving from the UK to Trinidad and Tobago). A number of the organizations are federations of bodies with strong national or regional branches, many operate on an individual membership basis with members

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dispersed around the Commonwealth, and more still carry out work throughout the Commonwealth's five regions. However, recent research using data from 2000 has found only 20 per cent of pan-Commonwealth NGOs to be active in all 54 member states—despite one criterion for accredited status being pan-Commonwealth operations. The majority—58 per cent—are active in between 30 and 50 countries, with 22 per cent, over one in five, being active in less than 30 states.<sup>24</sup>

Since the end of the 1980s there has been a marked rise in the number of pan-Commonwealth NGOs emerging from larger international bodies. The Organisation of Commonwealth United Nations Associations, Disabled Peoples International (Commonwealth Committee), the Commonwealth Group of Family Planning Associations, the Soroptimist International Commonwealth Group and the Association of Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections (ACAIS) are all international organizations that have formed a smaller Commonwealth sub-set. They have successfully gained accreditation by adding 'Commonwealth' to their names, using their branches in Commonwealth countries to achieve pan-Commonwealth presence, and meeting in the wings of their international governance meetings. These organizations bring to the Commonwealth their own constituencies and, in the case of some, such as ACAIS, a significant number of young people. The question now is how an organization such as ACAIS can get its younger membership interested and involved in the Commonwealth through its Commonwealth programmes, and what support the official Commonwealth can give ACAIS towards this end.

Armed with these facts, any plan to resuscitate the Commonwealth's standing among younger people with the help of pan-Commonwealth NGOs needs to be realistic about their capacity in terms of location, size and resources. Nevertheless, it should also recognize that there are clear practical and strategic reasons why these organizations are of significance for the wider Commonwealth and why they should be considered in any attempt to increase youth interest in the association as a whole. Such a drawing together of resources available to the Commonwealth through its member communities was strongly pushed by Heads of Government at the recent Coolum summit.

### **A rôle for the Peoples' Commonwealth?**

While Coolum itself was not a memorable occasion for the Peoples' Commonwealth, two out of the three documents produced by Heads of Government made reference to Commonwealth civil society. The *Coolum Declaration* called 'on the many inter-governmental, 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'. Arguing for 'the need for stronger links and better two-way communication and co-ordination between the official and non-governmental Commonwealth, and among Commonwealth NGOs', the Declaration states 'this will give Commonwealth activities greater impact, ensuring every programme produces lasting benefit'.<sup>25</sup> Commonwealth civil society was also taken up by the *Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group*. The report contains a number of references to Commonwealth civil society and to

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the importance of the Commonwealth as ‘a large family serviced by a wide variety of organisations that are inter-governmental, semi-governmental or non-governmental in character.’<sup>26</sup>

The Coolum documents taken as a whole clearly argue that the Peoples’ Commonwealth is an integral part of the modern organization. It therefore stands to reason that any attempt to increase youth interest in the Commonwealth must involve Commonwealth civil society in order to give official efforts ‘lasting impact’ and to ensure that ‘every programme produces lasting benefit’. Moreover, attempts to increase youth interest in the Commonwealth as an association and in pan-Commonwealth NGOs are symbiotically linked. Both need an injection of younger participation in order to thrive, or even survive, and youth interest in either the Commonwealth, or Commonwealth NGOs, inevitably increases youth interest in the other.

On a practical level the Commonwealth is not a big player. Its official agencies have limited resources, and at present the Commonwealth Secretariat is beset by a financial crisis leaving staff vacancies unadvertised, salaries frozen and programme budgets capped. While the income of accredited NGOs for 2000–01, for example, was over £27.8 million, for the same period the budget of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation came to £20.5 million.<sup>27</sup> In this climate the official Commonwealth has to look outside itself and draw on the range of resources available to the association, not least through the non-governmental and business communities. A joining up of the Commonwealth and its resources in this way is long overdue and could seriously enhance the association’s ability to reach out to young people, whether through publicity or programmes of work. The operations of the official Commonwealth are highly UK focused—only the Commonwealth of Learning and the four regional CYP Centres are based in other Commonwealth countries. While it is clear that the unofficial Commonwealth suffers from the same latent anglocentricity, those organizations based, or working, or with members outside the UK, do represent Commonwealth contacts and potential points of outreach with young people in those countries.

In some Commonwealth countries it is also the case that many younger citizens see the non-governmental as more attractive than the governmental sector. While the governmental is characterized by some young people as archaic, staid and slow moving, civil society is seen to be vibrant, innovative and in tune with issues of importance. In general civil society leaders are younger than their governmental counterparts. This is particularly true in certain parts of the Commonwealth, where governmental leaders have tended to hang onto power long past retirement age, or where age and experience are seen as a prerequisite for political office. In this way, if they can be tapped into, Commonwealth NGOs could be a big boost to the Commonwealth’s hopes of engaging younger generations in the association.

### **Young people and Commonwealth NGOs**

However, it is not just the official Commonwealth that has problems in attracting youth interest; as has already been suggested, the unofficial Commonwealth’s success is, at best, patchy. Evidence about the attractiveness

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of the unofficial Commonwealth to younger generations from the St Catherine's Conferences mentioned above is contradictory. A conference in 1994 suggested that one thing about the Commonwealth young people would find appealing was its 'network of contacts at the unofficial as well as the official level'.<sup>28</sup> However, in 2001, while debating 'we believe that the new generation does not need the Commonwealth', 'surprisingly little was said about the work of the many Commonwealth NGOs'.<sup>29</sup> This contradiction reflects the reality that many pan-Commonwealth NGOs struggle with youth participation, leaving membership meetings to be primarily of those with grey or white hair, and disproportionately male. Partly this is a rub-off from the 'unfashionability' of the Commonwealth with younger generations, but arguably it has more to do with the content and structure of the organizations in question.

Both these points were addressed by respondents to a questionnaire sent out to over 90 Commonwealth non-governmental organizations in autumn 2002, as part of the CPSU's Commonwealth Civil Society Project, asking 'why do you think so few young people involve themselves with Commonwealth NGOs?'. Responses, although limited, indicated four major areas of concern:

### *The image of the Commonwealth*

Image problem with a tendency to look back at what binds the Commonwealth together, rather than what binds the Commonwealth together today, eg key principles.

Perception that the Commonwealth is an anachronistic institution and that their efforts would be more effective elsewhere.

Seen as irrelevant to the lives of young people and issues that affect them—unemployment, access to training, disempowerment, etc.

Image of the Commonwealth has not caught up with its modern mission.

### *Lack of public knowledge*

People don't know about the Commonwealth and its work—problem of promotion. Often said that the Commonwealth works best as an informal network working behind the scenes but only sustainable if young people are part of that network.

Lack of knowledge about Commonwealth, Commonwealth NGOs and opportunities for involvement.

Young people do not hear of the activities of the Commonwealth.

### *Prevalence of professional associations*

Many accredited Commonwealth organisations are based on profession and young people may not be in a position in their careers to be involved in such groups.

Most Commonwealth NGOs are professional associations and so one would not expect them to involve youth all that much, if [you] want youth involved then need special NGOs targeted at them.

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A problem relates to the hierarchical nature of society, and business activity. Achieving professional qualifications is frequently a lengthy process, the usual age of qualification is about 26 years of age, and often 3 or 4 years more in a developing country.

### *Lack of follow-up*

Time and funding. Are those who have been involved encouraged to maintain relationships?

Much interest and activity in Golden Jubilee and Commonwealth Games—NGOs have to take account of this revival and make contact with schools and Higher Education institutions.

### *Other*

Despite the number of Commonwealth NGOs in London there seems less interest in Commonwealth activity by young people in the UK than elsewhere.

Adults don't like young people speaking for themselves and do not give them space or encouragement to do their own thing.

Some of these points were also evident around the postponed 2001 CHOGM, where a substantial number of young people expressed their interest in the Commonwealth not through pan-Commonwealth NGOs but through anti-globalization protest alliances. Despite the (temporary) groundswell of interest in the Commonwealth among young people in Australia, neither the protest alliances nor the pan-Commonwealth organizations made attempts to link up with each other, even though in many cases organizations were working on similar issues. For example, the CHOGM Action Network (CAN) campaigned around six central issues: Treaty Now,<sup>30</sup> No New WTO Round, Respect Human Rights, Prevent Climate Change, Cancel Third World Debt, and No Racism, No War. It produced fact sheets that included a list of websites for organizations working in these fields. Despite a number of Commonwealth organizations campaigning on one or more of CAN's target issues, the only reference to a pan-Commonwealth NGO was the New Zealand section of Amnesty International, which formed ACAIS for the 2001/2002 CHOGM.<sup>31</sup>

The interpretation of the Commonwealth taken by the protest alliances might have differed from that of more seasoned Commonwealth campaigners, but their efforts resulted in the Commonwealth being discussed at meetings and on websites by young Australian citizens—an achievement that pan-Commonwealth NGOs based in Australia would be proud of. Although both the protest alliances (particularly CAN, which did not seek to abolish the Commonwealth, rather to influence its agenda) and many pan-Commonwealth NGOs wanted to see the official Commonwealth reformed, the youth component of the alliances did not involve themselves with the more traditional pan-Commonwealth NGOs.

Such lack of interaction poses a number of questions:

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- Did the young people involved in the protest alliances not know about the pan-Commonwealth NGOs?
- If they did, are the pan-Commonwealth NGOs seen as too establishment (after all, many of them receive core funding from the Commonwealth Foundation) or not radical enough in their activities?
- Were there no obvious opportunities for young people to get involved with the pan-Commonwealth NGOs?
- Was the interest of these young people in the Commonwealth only momentary (ie around the CHOGM taking place in their country) rather than of a sustained nature?
- Will such interest—among young people in Nigeria or the same group of young people in Australia—emerge again around the next Commonwealth summit in Abuja?
- Are younger people more interested in newer organizational forms upon which the alliances were based, rather than the traditional structural forms of many pan-Commonwealth NGOs?
- What can pan-Commonwealth NGOs learn from the ability of protest alliances to attract and involve young people? Is this ability connected to the alliances' make-up (reliance on the internet; diversity of activists ('multi-generational, multi-class, multi-issue'); transient nature (forming and re-forming around key international meetings); high levels of democratic organization as opposed to hierarchy and bureaucracy; self-generated finance and use of direct action and peaceful civil disobedience)?<sup>32</sup>

It would appear that certain very basic structural issues about pan-Commonwealth NGOs are potentially off-putting to younger people, including membership criteria, fees, finances and logistics. Often unwittingly the logistical organization of pan-Commonwealth NGOs is not youth-friendly. Many meetings are held at times that young people are unable to make (particularly those starting out in their careers), such as the middle of the afternoon, only convenient to members who are retired or those who are able to take time off from work, ie those of managerial standing. If younger people are to participate in meetings and events they need to be scheduled at times when they are not at work, such as lunch times, evenings or weekends. Membership fees can also be prohibitive to recent graduates or those with a young family, and for all but the most affluent, the financial vulnerabilities of many pan-Commonwealth NGOs may put off potential young staffers. Many pan-Commonwealth NGOs rely on voluntary support and some are subject to periods where, for financial reasons, staff are not paid.<sup>33</sup> Financial frailties (low wages, lack of pay increases, short contracts, no benefits schemes, etc) also affect the ability of Commonwealth NGOs to retain young staff when other sectors, particularly the business community but also larger NGOs, can offer more financial stability.

Respondents to the CPSU's questionnaire clearly pointed out that the membership criteria of some Commonwealth NGOs—many of which are professional associations—are exclusionary, or off-putting, for young people. The very fact that many of the organizations are for professionals often excludes those that the Commonwealth classifies as youth. Qualified

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magistrates, judges, lawyers, doctors, architects, etc will in the main be over 29 by the time they are eligible to join their relevant Commonwealth association. (Not many of these Commonwealth professional associations have a membership bracket for students of the profession, which would be an obvious way of allowing younger people to join.) This is especially true when you consider that most young professionals would first join their national professional association before considering, or even being aware of, their Commonwealth equivalents. With some exceptions (such as the Commonwealth Journalists Association) few Commonwealth professional associations have individual members; most run membership schemes through national associations (eg COSATU, as a member of the Commonwealth Trade Union Council). This organizational framework is one step removed from the individual and less likely to give young people a strong connection to the Commonwealth or the Commonwealth professional association of which their national association is a member.

It is also questionable how many young people join professional organizations at all nowadays. The membership of trade unions has 'until recently been falling fast ... in most of the rich countries ... but it has increased in the newly industrialising countries'<sup>34</sup> and it could be that a similar overall downturn is affecting the membership of professional associations, with obvious repercussions for their Commonwealth cousins. The predominance of professional associations also automatically excludes the majority of Commonwealth youth, who have not had tertiary level education, been employed in the professions or even employed at all.<sup>35</sup> How are pan-Commonwealth NGOs engaging with these young Commonwealth citizens? To what extent do participants in Commonwealth events (official or unofficial) tend to be educated and affluent? What is being done to encourage a greater diversity of youth engagement with the Commonwealth at national, regional and international levels? Failure to grapple with these questions will leave the Commonwealth, both official and unofficial, as a collection of privileged elites whose deliberations, for the majority of the Commonwealth's citizens, mutates out of reach.

### **Strategies for change**

Recognizing the limited involvement of young people in their organizations, some pan-Commonwealth NGOs have taken steps to increase their engagement with younger generations. This has taken a number of forms, including efforts to attract younger staff or younger members, outreach work with younger people, attempts to engage younger people in workshops, events or programmes of work, and attempts at giving young people a voice.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Attracting younger staff*

It is arguable that as a single-issue organization, concentrating on the practical realization of human rights in the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) attracts the interest of more young people than do some of the pan-Commonwealth professional associations, eight of which make-up CHRI's sponsoring organizations. Typically, younger staffers (at present, of 28 staff, 18 are under the age of 29) are attracted to work for CHRI

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because of their interest in human rights, but become interested in the Commonwealth as an alternative vehicle through which rights can be promoted and protected. To encourage younger staff members CHRI runs an internship programme that offers opportunities for young people to work in its Ghana and India offices, gain experience in human rights and the Commonwealth, and contribute to CHRI's work programmes.

### *Attracting younger members*

The Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA) offers reduced rate membership fees (from £75 to £25 per conference cycle) for young lawyers who have been called to the bar or given licence to practice in the past five years.

### *Youth outreach*

Since the early 1990s the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), whose primary clientele is parliamentarians, has widened its focus from the enhancement of democratic practices and the professional development of its members to include the promotion of the Commonwealth and parliamentary democracy to younger people. 'Specific activities to link them with the Commonwealth and democratic systems have therefore become part of the CPA's strategic outlook.'<sup>37</sup> These activities have included youth parliaments and Commonwealth Day celebrations.

*Youth parliaments.* Using a 'learn by doing' approach to deepen young people's understanding of parliamentary democracy, several CPA branches have organized youth parliaments, the CPA has produced a planning kit to assist interested parties to organize youth parliaments in the future,<sup>38</sup> and two pan-Commonwealth youth parliaments (in 1997 and 2000) have been held in Manchester, UK. One participant at the 2000 event concluded: 'The general perception of the Commonwealth amongst participants at the commencement of proceedings was not particularly positive. Events such as the Millennium Youth Parliament go some way to highlighting the positive side of our joint heritage.'<sup>39</sup>

*Commonwealth Day celebrations.* Since 1993 the CPA has organized a programme in London for young people nominated by branches around the Commonwealth. The programme has recently been followed up by a smaller seminar to encourage fuller discussions on the Commonwealth and parliamentary democracy. The CPA also offers some funding to branches for innovative Commonwealth Day programmes for young people.

### *Engaging young people in events*

Some organizations have attempted to facilitate youth participation, countering the claim that young people are not aware of the work of pan-Commonwealth NGOs, by inviting them to take part in peak events. The Royal Commonwealth Society's (RCS) Sir David Thorne Youth Bursary Scheme was introduced at the RCS's 2000 International Meeting in Kuala Lumpur and enables young

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people, aged 18–35 years and resident in Commonwealth countries, to participate in the RCS's biennial International Meetings. Youth delegates are expected to involve themselves in Commonwealth activities when they return to their home countries, preferably through local RCS branches. Those awardees that maintain strong contacts with the RCS are invited back to subsequent meetings as mentors. Reporting on his experience at the 2002 meeting held in London, one bursary delegate wrote: 'I shall remember the opportunity afforded me to meet ... the vibrant and committed group of Bursary Delegates who came prepared to engage with a wide range of difficult issues, to share their vision for the future of the Commonwealth, and to co-operate to bring that vision about.'<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, in fulfilling its aim to use 'contacts and skills to promote agriculture in Commonwealth countries and to broaden the horizons of promising young farmers', the Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth (RASC) has sponsored the attendance of younger farmers at its biennial Commonwealth Agricultural Conference. The report of the 20th Conference, held in 2002, states, 'young delegates are an important feature of the Conference ... it [is] vitally important that young people are sponsored particularly by the full-time Agricultural Show Societies of the RASC. After all, Societies are investing in potential leaders.'<sup>41</sup>

### *Giving young people a voice*

There is of course one pan-Commonwealth NGO that is dedicated to youth work—the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council (CYEC)—which has organized youth exchanges between the UK and other Commonwealth countries for more than 30 years. In 2002 CYEC organized the CitizenYou Commonwealth Youth Summit. Over 200 young people aged 18–25 years, representing 50 Commonwealth countries, participated in a programme of home-stay visits across the UK, and in the summit itself at the University of Sunderland. The summit was 'an opportunity for Commonwealth young people to come together to share their vision of active citizenship—local, national and global—and consider the role that young adults should be encouraged to play in their respective societies'.<sup>42</sup> Fittingly the Summit was masterminded by a youth planning team and the Summit facilitators were young people drawn from across the Commonwealth—some of them with experience of the Commonwealth Youth Programme's Youth Caucus or the last Commonwealth Youth Forum. Heading the *Statement of Vision* produced by participants was the belief that 'young people are vital to the processes of development, democracy and participation. We, as citizens of the Commonwealth, have the responsibility, as well as the right, to participate in making change.' As a way of carrying forward these sentiments, participants worked on plans for citizenship resources, now being followed up on return to their home countries, and continue to debate ideas using the interactive CitizenYou website. The *Statement of Visions and Recommendations* produced a clear template for all sectors of the Commonwealth of the needs, priorities and vision of young people across the member states.

### **Recommendations**

In today's world none of the components that make-up the Commonwealth is a big player. Furthermore they all have a recognized difficulty attracting the interest and active participation of young people. As a consequence, the interest of younger generations in the Commonwealth itself—both as a concept and as a living, breathing institution—has waned. For this reason, the fates of all aspects of the Commonwealth—whether governmental or non-governmental—are inexorably bound together. But what is to be done? If, as seems clear from their reaction to the YFF Initiative, member states are not willing to prioritize youth as an area in need of resources, it would make sense, as this article has argued, to (a) tie in official and unofficial Commonwealth efforts and (b) build in youth elements to existing priorities.

Taking this into account, here are five suggestions of practical changes the Commonwealth could make to encourage the active involvement of young people.

#### *1. Focus group on youth*

The *Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group* recommended that thematic focus groups of accredited NGOs be formed to interact with the Commonwealth's three intergovernmental agencies through the Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies (CCCA).<sup>43</sup> One such group should concentrate on youth engagement with the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Secretariat's participation should include representatives from the Strategic Planning and Evaluation Division (to ensure lessons learnt influence cross-divisional planning) as well as CYP. Non-governmental participation should involve CYEC, representatives from the Commonwealth Business Council, to bring in the business community, and a representative from each of the other themed focus groups, who could then report back on activities discussed by the youth group. Young people should also participate in the group, with younger participants drawn either from CYP governance structures, national youth councils or younger people working in official or unofficial Commonwealth organizations. The group could prove a useful method of information exchange, problem solving and, by default, potential joint-planning across the different sectors of the Commonwealth family.

#### *2. Participatory culture*

Lack of youth interest in the Commonwealth is clearly connected to the lack of opportunity for young people, as part of wider civil society, to engage with Commonwealth processes in a meaningful way and therefore become stakeholders in them. The official Commonwealth must undertake a step-change and initiate a participatory culture within the association, an integral plank of which should be youth participation. Such a policy shift is about extending the range of voices being heard in the Commonwealth setting and taking measures to encourage and enable traditionally marginalized sectors (whether they be youth, women, indigenous peoples, the poor, the disabled, etc) to speak up. Again this

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is a policy priority agreed upon by Heads of Government at the Coolum summit: 'we seek a Commonwealth known, owned and valued by its peoples, responsive to their evolving needs, and invigorated by a more focused and productive partnership between governments and civil society.'<sup>44</sup> Progress is now being made to translate this mandate into practical action, but any measures proposed should be evaluated to consider how they will encourage young people to engage with the Commonwealth. Efforts to empower all aspects of civil society to participate in official Commonwealth processes could form part of current moves to mainstream human rights across the Commonwealth Secretariat.

### *3. Mainstream youth*

Participants at one of the St Catherine's Conferences made several references to the perceived inadequacy of youth structures within the official Commonwealth. Comments included, 'the Commonwealth Youth Programme at the Commonwealth Secretariat is not enough. It is not a matter just of giving young people a voice, they need to be engaged', and 'youth engagement is needed throughout Commonwealth structures and at the highest level'.<sup>45</sup> These statements ask for the needs of younger people to be mainstreamed *across* official Commonwealth programmes and for young people themselves to have a voice in how these priorities and programmes are shaped. It is not enough for the Commonwealth to address 'youth issues' as a compartmentalized package, to be thought about once programmes have already been designed. A youth angle should be mainstreamed into Commonwealth activity in the same way that gender or regional representation are usually factored in. There is also a need for the unofficial Commonwealth to take on board this thinking by designing and implementing youth policies in partnership with young people, answering some of the questions raised in this article. With their combined experience and contacts CYP and CYEC could prove useful assets in this regard and the Commonwealth Foundation could be encouraged to resource and organize professional development sessions for accredited organizations on how to encourage active youth participation.

### *4. Commonwealth education*

In England and Wales, at least, it is a particularly opportune moment to be discussing young people and the Commonwealth. As from August 2002 citizenship education has become part of the curriculum for all pupils in secondary education with specific attention being paid to the Commonwealth. Despite the current changes at the Commonwealth Institute, the fact that all young people in England and Wales will receive education on the Commonwealth at school is an opportunity to be built upon, especially as one of the reasons respondents to the CPSU questionnaire thought young people did not get involved with pan-Commonwealth NGOs was lack of knowledge. How many young people will continue their interest in the association when they leave school? What information, for example, will they be given about becoming involved with the unofficial Commonwealth? Should the building and site of the Commonwealth

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Institute in Kensington be sold, it has been suggested that a first charge should be for the education of young people in member states on the Commonwealth. This would reflect the historic charitable purpose of the Institute.

### *5. Commonwealth young alumni scheme*

Describing the Commonwealth Association (for former staff of the official Commonwealth) Sir Shridath Ramphal has commented: 'I see the Association ... as being in the highest traditions of an Alumni Association: giving support and strength; keeping aloft the Commonwealth's ideals, sometimes recalling our *alma mater* to its true mission.'<sup>46</sup> The Commonwealth should organize an alumni association for those young people who have experienced some contact with the Commonwealth (whether through the official or unofficial parts of the association) to try to foster a more sustained engagement rather than a one-off experience. This could involve those who have experienced Commonwealth youth fora, CPA youth parliaments, CHRI internships, Commonwealth Foundation Fellowships, Commonwealth election missions (one observer on each mission is now a young person), RCS International Meetings or St Catherine's Conferences to name but a few. What happens to these potential ambassadors for the Commonwealth once their initial contact with the association has passed? It is here that a Commonwealth young alumni scheme could be of value, as the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships Plan have recently found out through schemes with their own past students.

## **Conclusion**

Without a boost of young blood to complement the energy and experience of its older supporters, there will be no one to undertake a review of the role of the Commonwealth later in the twenty-first century, as all interested parties will have passed away. Each constituent part of the Commonwealth family should consider what it can do to encourage youth activity in its own organization, and by default, the wider Commonwealth. This should not just focus on 'big' ideas and projects but also on the importance of small changes in daily operations and future programme planning that could make a significant difference to how young people engage with the Commonwealth. It is in this piecemeal way, and by linking up activities across sectors, that the Commonwealth could live on, and be of value to its citizens.

## **Notes**

- 1 *C21 Citizens: Young People in a Changing Commonwealth*, p 59, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2002.
- 2 <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/cyp/default.asp>. The official Commonwealth views young people as those aged 15–29 years, despite the fact that many of these individuals, particularly in the developing Commonwealth, will have been shouldering adult responsibilities, and even supporting children of their own, for years.

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- 3 One such exercise, which could be developed further, being a conference at Yarra Valley, Australia, in October 2000 organized by the Commonwealth Foundation, which proposed a 'Youth Across the Commonwealth' scheme.
- 4 *Young Britain and the Commonwealth*, Windsor: Foundation of St Catherine, 1994.
- 5 *The Commonwealth into the Twenty-First Century*, p 13, Windsor: Foundation of St Catherine, 1995.
- 6 *Does the New Generation Need the Commonwealth?*, pp 5, 11, Windsor: Foundation of St Catherine, 2001.
- 7 <http://www.cyec.org.uk/cyec.asp>.
- 8 D. Ingram, *Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Information Programme*, p 19, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997. More effort was given to this end at Manchester—especially in Northwest England—than at many of the previous Games.
- 9 *Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government*, section VI paragraph 47, Coolum: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2002.
- 10 For a discussion on Commonwealth Peoples' Centres, see A. Shah, *Relations between the official and unofficial Commonwealth, Australia's Commonwealth Summit: A Briefing on Issues before the Leaders at Coolum in March 2002*, Braamfontein and London: CPSU-SAIIA, 2002. For a wider discussion see M. Pianta, *Parallel summits of global civil society: an update, Global Civil Society 2002*, London: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- 11 <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/21729/20011003/free.freespeech.org/chogmfreezone/index.html>; <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/21728/20011003/www.stopchogm.org/index.html>; and <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/21727/20020305/www.chogm-action-network.org/index.html>.
- 12 <http://www.cypyouth.net> or <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/cyp>. For a critique of CYP and YFF, see Royal Commonwealth Society, *A New Vision for the Commonwealth*, p 16, London: RCS, 2002.
- 13 CYP's Pacific base has temporarily relocated to Queensland from Honiara because of current instability in the Solomon Islands.
- 14 *Report of the Commonwealth Secretary-General 2001: Continuity and Renewal in the New Millennium*, p 7, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001. Many commentators also emphasize the important contribution made by young people today, while they are still young, as well as in the future, eg David Kemp, Australian Federal Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs: 'at best they are referred to as our future ... that is far from the real story. Young people are the here and now.' Posted online at <http://www.cypyouth.net/About.htm>.
- 15 *Report of the Commonwealth Secretary-General 2001, op cit*, Ref 14, p 54.
- 16 Ingram, *op cit*, Ref 8, pp 16–17.
- 17 J. Robertson, *Next Steps in the Promotion of the Commonwealth: Continual Improvements for a Continual Challenge*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2002.
- 18 UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, p 5, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- 19 *Collaboration Between the Commonwealth Secretariat's Divisions/Units and NGOs*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2002. Following direction from the High Level Review Group Report, during their December 2002 meeting, the Secretariat's Board of Governors discussed the possibility of accreditation for organizations operating at a sub-Commonwealth level.
- 20 Term coined by US journalist Jonathan Rauch to describe the paralyzing effect

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- brought about by civil society overload on democratic processes unable to cope with the demand. Cited in Y. Shamsie, *Engaging with Civil Society: Lessons from the OAS, FTAA and Summits of the Americas*, p 8, Ottawa: North South Institute, 2000.
- 21 'As a result of ... explosive growth in participation, the system that has evolved over several years for facilitating the interaction between the United Nations and civil society actors is showing signs of strain.' Report of the Secretary-General, *Strengthening of the United Nations*, Section IV C, paragraph 139, 2002, posted at <http://www.un.org>.
- 22 A. Shah, *Joining Up the Commonwealth: A Response to Governmental Calls for Increased Co-ordination with Civil Society*, London: CPSU, 2002.
- 23 See A. Shah, Colonial hangover? An analysis of the representativeness of the official and unofficial Commonwealth, *CHRI News*, New Delhi: CHRI, 2002.
- 24 From recent research presented by Claire Auplat (CPSU Associate Fellow) for a CPSU seminar on 'Commonwealth Civil Society After Coolum', June 2002, at [http://www.cpsu.org.uk/downloads/ICS\\_Sem2.pdf](http://www.cpsu.org.uk/downloads/ICS_Sem2.pdf).
- 25 *The Coolum Declaration—The Commonwealth in the 21st Century: Continuity and Renewal*, Coolum: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2002.
- 26 *Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government*, *op cit*, Ref 9, section V paragraph 42.
- 27 *Data available on 12 November regarding the 69 Pan-Commonwealth NGOs*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2002; and *Report of the Commonwealth Secretary-General 2001*, *op cit*, Ref 14, p 54.
- 28 *Young Britain and the Commonwealth*, *op cit*, Ref 4, p 5.
- 29 *Does the New Generation Need the Commonwealth?*, *op cit*, Ref 6, p 4.
- 30 Articulating the long-standing demand by certain sectors of the Indigenous community for a treaty between Indigenous Australians and the Australian government.
- 31 The Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA)—a member organization of the Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples (CAIP)—was also cited.
- 32 K. Naidoo and I. Ravindran, *A Rights-Based Understanding of the Anti-Globalisation Movement*, 2002, posted online at <http://www2.ichrp.org>.
- 33 This was the case, for example, with CHRI's Director between 1992 and 1993.
- 34 *New Internationalist*, 341, 2001, posted online at <http://www.newint.org/issue341/facts.htm>.
- 35 'Across the Commonwealth, unemployment rates in the 15–24 age group range between 30% and 50%. In parts of the Caribbean Commonwealth, the figure is staggering: close to 70%.' C. S. Gomez, Youth empowerment and the Millennium development goals, *C21 Citizens*, *op cit*, Ref 1, p 88.
- 36 There are other examples of pan-Commonwealth NGOs working in each of these areas but for the sake of brevity only one or two for each category have been picked out here.
- 37 See <http://www.cpahq.org/youth/index.htm> and *The Resurgence of Democracy: The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association 1991–2001*, London: CPA, 2001. With a membership of parliamentarians CPA does not define itself as non-governmental; however, CPA's youth outreach programme was felt to be of relevance to this discussion.
- 38 *Establishing Your Youth Parliament: A Planning Guide*, London: CPA, 2002.
- 39 Sam Moreton, Delegate of the New South Wales Branch of the CPA, quoted in A. Staddon, Commonwealth youth parliaments, *C21 Citizens*, *op cit*, Ref 1, pp 85–86.

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- 40 B. Spagnolo, Report on the Royal Commonwealth Society International Meeting, 2002.
- 41 *20th Commonwealth Agricultural Conference: Conference Report 29 July–1 August 2002*, p 8, London: RASC, 2002.
- 42 The CitizenYou website at <http://www.cyec.org.uk/citizenyou.asp>.
- 43 *Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government*, *op cit*, Ref 9, section V paragraph 45.10.
- 44 *Ibid*, section II paragraph 8.
- 45 *Does the New Generation Need the Commonwealth?*, *op cit*, Ref 6, p 11.
- 46 S. Ramphal, *Global Governance or A New Imperium: Which is it to be?*, 2002, posted online at <http://www.rcsint.org>. See also this issue of *The Round Table*.