

Civil Society in the Commonwealth¹

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At the 2002 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), leaders gave a call to “join with us in building closer Commonwealth ‘family links’”. This followed from the recommendations of the High Level Review Group (HLRG) which presented its report at the Coolum CHOGM and recommended the strengthening of links with the non-governmental Commonwealth as they “give the Commonwealth a depth and reach that is unique”.

Civil society recommendations in the High Level Review Group (HLRG) report consisted of the following: a call for strengthening of links between the official and the unofficial Commonwealth (Section VI), setting up criteria for accreditation of NGOs to the Commonwealth (Section VI), organisation of Commonwealth professional associations and NGOs into focus groups to foster participation in the Coolum Committee (Sections V, VI) and designation by governments of specific Commonwealth centres (Section VI).

The unofficial or the people’s Commonwealth is wider than the pan-Commonwealth organisations and associations that it is usually seen to comprise of. It consists of a vast network of organisations at a local, regional and pan-Commonwealth level. The main pan-Commonwealth organisations spend £17.3 million on programmes annually. Sums spent by other pan-Commonwealth organisations and charities (including funds raised annually by the Commonwealth Games) are at least £ 122 million a year. The large Commonwealth Associations have strong networks. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has 16,000 parliamentarians in 172 parliaments. The Commonwealth Local Government Forum has a membership of tens of thousands of elected mayors and councillors. In this context, the expertise and resources of the unofficial Commonwealth are as wide as that of governments.

However, while some of the larger pan-Commonwealth organisations are quasi-governmental in scope, the majority of organisations are very small and dependent on external resources for support. These organisations need support through collaboration with other NGOs and support from governments and the inter-governmental Commonwealth to be linked to regional networks. Financial resources and support are essential to strengthen these organisations and NGOs in their institutional and technical capacity as well as to increase their networking and collaboration at national and international levels.

As such organisations seek to form networks for regional advocacy and policy work, the key question is the extent to which they can influence official processes in the Commonwealth. Linked to this is the question of how far young persons can participate in official decision making processes, since the future of the Commonwealth depends upon the formation of a more inclusive and participatory body. These are the issues assessed here in relation to civil society in the Commonwealth.

Accreditation

Stronger relations between the official and the unofficial Commonwealth can be fostered through pan-Commonwealth organisations receiving accreditation to Commonwealth meetings. The HLRG report recommended that the Secretary-General propose criteria for accreditation of NGOs as pan-Commonwealth NGOs to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and to ministerial meetings. Minimum criteria suggested were a commitment to the Commonwealth’s fundamental values, representation of the diversity of Commonwealth countries and principles of transparency and openness to all members.

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Procedures for accreditation to the Commonwealth were approved by the Commonwealth Secretariat's Board of Governors in May and organisations were invited to apply by the end of August 2003. Decisions on accreditation were made by a sub-committee of representatives of eight Commonwealth developed and developing states. The Secretariat received only nine applications, of which six were successful, with one of the organisations receiving joint accreditation with another. The number of applications this year were very limited but applications to the next round in the first quarter of 2004 are likely to increase, as more organisations learn about this process. In a related decision to facilitate administrative procedures, 68 organisations accredited to the last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) will be automatically accredited to CHOGM in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2003.

Accreditation could lead to a wider and larger representation by civil society organisations at Commonwealth meetings if organisations perceive it to provide enough benefits. In an environment of limited resources, civil society organisations need to select the inter-governmental platform that could further advance their work. In its present form, accreditation is not all-encompassing. While accreditation is provided "to the Commonwealth", pan-Commonwealth organisations do not receive unrestricted access to Commonwealth meetings. The process does not limit the different arrangements in place for various ministerial meetings. Organisations need to display competence in the field or sector of the intended meeting to apply for accreditation. The number of organisations and representatives eligible for accreditation varies according to the size of the venue. A system of streamlining applications to ministerial meetings needs to be put in place.

For the 2003 CHOGM, accredited delegates were provided logistical assistance with travel and accommodation and will receive access to a civil society lounge with office facilities in Abuja. A landmark development was the invitation to accredited delegates to participate in a civil society consultation hosted by the Commonwealth Foundation prior to the Committee of the Whole meeting. Following the High Level Review Group report, the Committee of the Whole met a month in advance of CHOGM in London, rather than in the host country just prior to CHOGM. This enabled a wider discussion of issues and participation by a range of pan-Commonwealth organisations with recommendations forwarded to governments meeting in the Committee of the Whole.

With these new procedures, the CPSU civil society project's recommendation for organisations to be "accredited to the Commonwealth" has been recognised. Accreditation is available for organisations working across Commonwealth countries as well as those operating at national and regional levels with enough influence internationally. It is not a pre-requisite that organisations use the word "Commonwealth" in their name, which has widened the scope for new applications.

This process could develop in various directions. To encourage the formation of new organisations in the Commonwealth, a process of registration for organisations wishing to use the word "Commonwealth" should be defined. At the same time, pan-Commonwealth organisations based in the UK should consider relocating head offices to other regions in the Commonwealth, to reduce operating expenses and widen interest in specific Commonwealth activities.

Ministerial meetings

Interest-based groups of NGOs have sprung around Commonwealth ministerial meetings, particularly on issues of law, education, women and health. Education and health ministers meetings have become more open to civil society presence in recent years. Strong civil society representation was in evidence at the Commonwealth Health Ministers Meetings with the WHO in Geneva in 2002 and 2003 and the Education Ministers Meeting in Edinburgh in October 2003.

At the same time, if Commonwealth ministers are able to meet prior to major international gatherings, they could establish common positions on the issues being discussed. The meetings of Commonwealth finance ministers takes place prior to the annual meetings of the World Bank and the IMF. In a consultation at the Commonwealth Secretariat in 2002, pan-Commonwealth organisations called on the Commonwealth Secretariat to encourage member countries to liaise more closely at UN and other international meetings to secure achievement of common objectives.

At the Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting (CFMM) in 2002, civil society organisations were invited to present their views for the first time. The Foundation appointed a global civil society steering committee to guide the consultation process on the Monterrey consensus, responding to the UN Conference on Financing for development, Monterrey, Mexico. This dialogue involved about 150 civil society representatives from 20 countries in a series of regional and national consultations in Ghana, Jamaica, Fiji Islands, Sri Lanka and the UK. In London, 35 representatives met to develop their position, articulated in the 'Commonwealth Civil Society Statement on Financing for Development'. In the CFMM communiqué, "ministers agreed to build on and strengthen this partnership, and establish the process of civil society engagement as a routine element of preparations for future meetings of finance ministers". The position of civil society organisations was less visible at the 2003 Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting in Brunei Darrusalam but a statement on provision of essential services was presented to ministers.

Commonwealth leaders need to secure a significant increase in resources to sustain and introduce new development programmes in the Commonwealth. Integral to this process is the building of better partnerships between the official and the unofficial Commonwealth. Civil society organisations have been seeking to exert influence on official processes in their regions. In relation to financial issues, in 2002 they called for "partnership with government that enhances peoples' participation". This includes playing a role in policy and budgetary processes at national and international levels and providing support and expertise to NGO liaison units in finance ministries, government boards and regional institutions that facilitate the distribution of resources.

These examples show that there are new opportunities to strengthen civil society advocacy around ministerial meetings. A system of best practice for evaluating ways to sustain these processes should be developed.

Focus groups

The High Level Review Group has emphasised the importance of co-ordination of Commonwealth activities. The Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth of Learning meet quarterly as part of the Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies (CCCA), renamed the Coolum Committee. The committee is responsible for improving co-ordination and co-operation among Commonwealth organisations, developing joint programmes and reducing duplication of efforts. These meetings, including the latest held in November 2003, have been used as occasions to report on each organisation's activities.

The HLRG recommendation for the Coolum committee to invite other pan-Commonwealth bodies and NGOs to participate in its meetings, according to the subjects addressed, has not been followed up. Focus groups on areas of functional interest, could create a strategy of consensus on core areas of the Commonwealth's work, such as poverty reduction and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The need for focus groups has been voiced consistently by pan-Commonwealth organisations, including at the June 2003 consultation in London by the Commonwealth Foundation on 'Maximising Civil Society's Contribution to Development and Democracy'. The CPSU has raised the need for focus groups to achieve better co-ordination of the official Commonwealth with "clusters of Commonwealth civil society activity".

Restructuring at the Commonwealth Secretariat reflects a response to calls for engaging more with civil society. The Strategic Planning and Evaluation Division (SPED) was set up to provide coordination among Commonwealth bodies and improve the Commonwealth Secretariat's relations with civil society. The post of Civil Society Liaison Officer, a joint post with the Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth Secretariat, is a step towards better coordination between these bodies. The inter-governmental bodies have worked towards one major consultation exercise with civil society organisations each year. To a large extent, civil society discussion has shifted around ministerial meetings and preparatory meetings to each of the main Ministerial Meetings.

The issue of engaging young people is central to the future of the Commonwealth. Pan-Commonwealth organisations need to make a concerted effort to recruit young people in their areas of work. The official

Commonwealth acknowledges the need to involve more young people in their work. Youth representatives participating in the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meetings are one success story. Another innovation is the inclusion of youth observers in election monitoring. The Commonwealth has a proven record for technical assistance towards improving electoral systems, providing better voting arrangements and improving parliamentary practice. Youth were included in the Commonwealth Election Observer Missions to Zimbabwe in 2002, Kenya in December 2002 and recently in Nigeria. This area could form a model for mainstreaming of youth in other Commonwealth activities.

Role of civil society in governance

Along with a free media and an independent legal system, a vibrant civil society is one of the key elements in democratic governance. This is as true of smaller as well of larger countries. However, freedom of association cannot be taken for granted. In the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States, and the anti-terror legislation passed in the majority of Commonwealth countries, some states have seen a tightening of the space permitted for civil society. The scope for debate and dissent has receded. Governments have characterised dissent as illegitimate, or a veil for opposition to the government rather than to particular policies of the government. Organisations which lobby at international levels have been termed anti-national.

Twelve years after the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, 1991, Commonwealth leaders need to put new life into these commitments. Four years after the Fancourt Declaration, 1999, they need to review not only the Commonwealth progress towards the Millennium Development Goals -- on which Commonwealth Education Ministers have been advising them -- but also the reality of people-centred development and human rights. Too many governments are still nervous of public participation in governance, and in local government, when it is essential to real human development. They need to recognise the diversity of their societies as a source of strength and vitality, rather than a cause of insecurity and communal friction.

As with other international bodies, the Commonwealth has had difficulty relating to civil society and NGOs, and even in defining this sector. The Commonwealth Business Council, which brings together the governments and the private sector has made considerable progress since 1997, but is still finding its way. Only a limited number of civil society organisations will ever see the benefit in linking with an association perceived to be as remote and short of realpolitik power as the Commonwealth. Following a burst of activity in the 1970s, stimulated by the Commonwealth Foundation, the official Commonwealth has been negligent in stimulating professional and other non-governmental bodies which take the 54 member states as their frame of reference. It is hoped that the recent consultancy report for the Foundation, by Professor Stephen Matlin, will lead to the establishment of a mechanism which can provide initial funding for bona fide new Commonwealth NGOs.

The Commonwealth has made a lot of progress in relating to civil society since Coolum, but lessons need to be learnt. The historic meeting of civil society and government representatives prior to the gathering of the Committee of the Whole in London in November 2003 was probably too large, generalised in content, and unclear about what either side could bring to the other. However, if sustained, it could lead the way to more productive interactions in future. What is encouraging is the degree of seriousness with which all Commonwealth bodies are approaching a major task of reaching out to various constituent groups. If the Commonwealth is standing up for its citizens, it must stand up for their civil societies as well as their governments. This will involve a steady process of adjustment.

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