



“The Commonwealth and International Development: Networking Global Actors”

Summary report of the CPSU workshop at the Commonwealth People’s Forum, 11.30am-1pm Teri Zammit Room, Mediterranean Conference Centre, Valletta, Malta, 23rd November 2005

Speakers: Colin Ball, PRIA, former Director of the Commonwealth Foundation
Richard Bourne, former Head of the CPSU
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Chair: Alan Perry, Associate, CPSU
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Summary report

Colin Ball, PRIA, and former director of the Commonwealth Foundation Overseas Development Institute’s (ODI’s) Civil Society Partnership Program (CSPP)
Mr. Ball assessed the 'infrastructure' options for the Overseas Development Institute’s (ODI’s) Civil Society Partnership Program (CSPP):

The [Civil Society Partnership Programme \(CSPP\)](#) is a six-year £1m pa programme that began in April 2005. The objective of the program is to 'promote improved contribution by CSOs to pro-poor national and international development policies'. More specifically, collaborative work will ensure that:

- CSOs understand better how evidence can contribute to pro-poor policy processes;
- Regional capacity to support Southern CSOs is established;
- Useful information on current development policy issues, and how this knowledge can contribute to pro-poor policy, is easily accessible to CSOs;
- CSOs participate actively in Southern and Northern policy networks to promote pro-poor policies.

The inception study has found that the three areas of research, civil society, and policy process are clearly overlapping but not combined systematically. It identified a need to

promote ideas from each approach because development policy is currently failing to bring the three together.

A draft 'issues paper' was circulated for feedback by Friday 9th December 2005; feedback to be emailed to odistudy@pria.org

Richard Bourne, former Head of CPSU

Globalisation

Mr. Bourne assessed the impact of globalisation and its implications for the Commonwealth. In a globalised world, the Commonwealth has to be selective. Many challenges confront the Commonwealth yet its selection of issues is limited by its capacity and its values as set out in the Harare Declaration.

The Commonwealth's positive points are that it is:

- The strongest international institution other than the UN
- Grounded in democracy
- Development focused
- Supportive of pluralist societies
- An asset to economics and trade: taking a lead on debt, aid and trade access
- Has a family atmosphere
- And a shared common language

However, it is necessary to accept that the post-colonial feeling is still raw within the Commonwealth.

The clumsy top-down approach adopted by the official Commonwealth stands in stark contrast to that of Commonwealth civil society which underpins it. Civil society must be viewed as an asset to the Commonwealth, and it is interesting to note that Commonwealth countries in Africa have a much better civil society than their Francophone neighbours.

The Commonwealth, the African Union, and the European Union

The momentum of the G8 in 2005 and the commitment to support the development of Africa is in real danger of dying out in 2006. The Commonwealth must keep this debate flowing and action forthcoming. Commonwealth leaders can use their meeting in Malta in November to mobilise lasting international support for African development. This will undoubtedly be described as a Valletta compact, leading to a Valletta process. It will require a joint approach by the Commonwealth with the European and African Unions, in the first instance. It will combat the danger of the continent's disillusion with the intended leap forward for Africa in 2005, involving aid, debt write-off and improved access to international markets. It will provide monitoring and accountability mechanisms, internationally and nationally, which can support continuing progress.

Commonwealth Heads should:

1. Endorse the setting up of a joint expert group, nominated by the African Union, the Commonwealth, the European Union and certain other bodies such as the Francophonie and Arab League, to review progress on a six-monthly basis on development aid, debt write-off and fairer access to world markets for Africa. It would provide a running commentary on the progress and setbacks of African development in the terms set out by the international community, including the G8 and the European Union, in 2005. It would help the world to deliver on its leaders' public promises.

2. Encourage the growth of "Valletta watch" groups in individual African countries, building on civil society support for the pioneering African Peer Review Mechanism. These groups, comprising representatives of civil society, academia and the private sector, should monitor the actual delivery of international support on a country-by country basis, and the use to which the extra resources are allocated. These watch groups should be constituted in each country, but could receive external support from the European Commission and the intergovernmental Commonwealth Foundation.

The Commonwealth needs to reform

Mr. Bourne made the following recommendations:

1. Establish a Commonwealth International Monitoring Group with the following mandate:

- Regular review/ audit of commitments made at CHOGM's
- In house monitoring of AU and the peer review mechanism
- Nationally there should be the formation of civil society watch groups
- Internationally Commonwealth countries should work together.

2. Increase civil society engagement in the Commonwealth

- Address the democratic deficit in the Commonwealth
- Stop electing Secretary General behind closed doors
- International hustings for the next Secretary Generals
- Civil society needs to breath some fresh air into the process

3. Review of Commonwealths Finances

- Establish an international expert group on financing of the Commonwealth
- Small countries must cover cost of subscription
- Feasible financial base for long term success of the Commonwealth
- Needs review and civil society can aid the Commonwealth in achieving this

Daisy Cooper, Project Officer, CPSU
(Transcript of presentation)

Introduction

Over the last eighteen months at the CPSU, I have been looking at how the Commonwealth can help the UN to strengthen and reform the UN development system, and I've drawn one main conclusion – that the Commonwealth is like the guy or girl who everyone likes but no one wants to go on a date with.

Given the opportunity, any Commonwealth government will likely talk about how the Commonwealth's heart is in the right place – how the Commonwealth is committed to development, democracy, human rights and good governance; that the Commonwealth's decisions are made using democratic mechanisms of negotiation and consensus; and that the Commonwealth is not just a family of nations, but of people.

As important and as true as these characteristics are, it seems that no-one wants to go on a date with the Commonwealth. No one government, leader or other political personality at the moment, really *really* wants to use the Commonwealth. And, they won't admit why.

People seem embarrassed to admit that there are power politics in the Commonwealth and that there is often resistance to civil society; they are embarrassed to admit that less and less money is going to the Commonwealth institutions, most crucially the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation; and they are embarrassed to admit that the feeling of “family” which pervades the CHOGM and the Commonwealth People's Forum does not survive outside Commonwealth fora, notably when Commonwealth governments sit at the opposite ends of the negotiation table in the UN or WTO.

Why is this? Maybe because they think the Commonwealth is so weak, that you shouldn't kick a good man whilst he's down. Maybe not. Maybe because the “soft values” of the CW – development and democracy – are not as sexy as the “hard issues” of guns, money and trade. Maybe not. Maybe because any meaningful revitalisation would cost money. Maybe not.

Whatever the reason, the outcome is that the Commonwealth is very good at saying things, but not always good at delivering.

My view is that we shouldn't be embarrassed about this, after all, every organisation has its faults. Rather, we should acknowledge them and openly debate them. We should then design and implement practical ways that we overcome them, in order that we can build a stronger, more effective, more engaging, more democratic, and more pro-active Commonwealth.

Given this view of the Commonwealth, I would like to address two issues. Firstly, I would like to make the case as to why and how the Commonwealth can work with other organisations, using the UN as an example. Secondly, I will set out what I think various

constituents of the Commonwealth need to do, in order that they are queuing up to invite the Commonwealth out to dinner.

Why and how can the Commonwealth work with other organisations

Firstly, why and how can the Commonwealth work with other organisations?

The 'why'. Well, in a globalised world we have global problems which can only be answered by global solutions. The Commonwealth Secretariat often says the multilateralism is under threat, and that greater and deeper co-operation is necessary. I would go further; I would say that we simply can't do without it.

Now the 'How' using the UN as an example. The Commonwealth has a natural tendency towards informal methods like behind the scenes diplomacy, and ad hoc meetings. This is certainly a charm of the Commonwealth, but it is not always productive, and we should all be honest about this.

The Commonwealth and the UN work together in three key ways. Firstly, Commonwealth Ministerial Meetings are often held in the wings of the UN or international meetings. These include finance, education, health, law and foreign ministers. Indeed, since 2002, the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers have been meeting in the wings of the UN General Assembly but they have never had a clearly defined role. Last year in 2004, foreign ministers discussed the important matter of trade, but only one statement was made by Nigeria (the chair of the Commonwealth at the time) to which only a couple of Caribbean states replied.

Secondly, the Commonwealth uses Memorandums of Understandings – MOUs. Some are very effective, but some are just an empty shell. The MOU between the Commonwealth Secretariat and the IWOKRAMA rainforest in Guyana, and between the Commonwealth Secretariat and the ACP Secretariat are both good and productive, but most of the MOUs with different UN agencies have little if any substance.

Thirdly, there is a shared sense of solidarity between the two organisations, manifested by the mutual exchange of staff. That said, the number of Commonwealth Secretariat staff is very small, and so this sense of solidarity is often limited to a small number of individual personalities who may have good or bad experiences of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth and UN also complement each other through mutual support in three key areas. Firstly, political. During the Apartheid years in South Africa, it was the Commonwealth who led the opposition, with the UN supporting it. Conversely, in Namibia, it was the UN who led, and the Commonwealth who supported.

Secondly, in the exchange of best practice. One example is the Commonwealth's Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Internal Displacement in the Commonwealth: Common Themes and Best Practice Guidelines, which included recommendations to the Commonwealth Secretariat on how to better use its good offices and other recommendations designed to give practical effect to UN goals. More recently, the

Commonwealth Youth Development Index has been recognised by the UN as being the international standard by which to measure youth development.

Thirdly, in their approaches to development. The UN, for a number of reasons, has become and is increasingly reactive with emergency and peacekeeping funds that represent a shift from long-term development. Whilst the Commonwealth is not a development agency, it does use its technical expertise to continue such long-term development work, but not of course on a comparable budget.

UN issues that the Commonwealth can support

There are also UN issues that the Commonwealth can support. The MDGs are a superlative example; the Commonwealth has expressed its commitment to achieving the MDGs, and Commonwealth civil society, supported by the Commonwealth Foundation, has assessed their perceptions of progress at a national level.

The Commonwealth has also supported the UN's call for donor countries to reach 0.7% of GNP as Overseas Development Assistance, through its Action Plan on the Monterrey Consensus.

But on the issue of UN reform, the Commonwealth Secretariat is currently doing nothing. As such and for the last 18 months, the CPSU has been doing work on the Commonwealth's role in reforming the UN development system.

As many of you who have worked with the UN know, the sheer number of UN agencies makes the UN development system uncoordinated; they have overlapping mandates and different funding mechanisms that create inter-agency rivalry. The study shows that individual funding mechanisms create disparities; namely between who negotiates and who implements the UN's Common Country Assessment, and between who manages at a country level (the Resident Coordinator) and those that hold the purse strings at country level.

The UN development system is operating below critical mass; it needs more, more flexible and more predictable funding. As donors fund their pet projects reflecting their priorities, country ownership of national development strategies and priorities in partner countries is undermined. The allocation of money is based on the size of a country and rich country definitions of security.

Post UN Summit, the UN Secretary General's office is writing the terms of reference for a proposed study on exactly these issues.

The CPSU has been looking at practical ways that the Commonwealth can support this study. The Commonwealth's niche is that it is a trans-regional organisation with both developed and developing members, as a group, it represents the views of both donor to and recipients of the UN development system.

The CPSU has recommended Commonwealth Heads of Government make a statement committing the Commonwealth to contribute to, via pilot studies or other practical solutions, the UN's study. Such a contribution could include national civil society consultations, simultaneous Select Committees, and some pilot studies – administered by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the UN together. These are the recommendations set out in the CPSU report “Improving the UN development system: is there a Commonwealth consensus?”

What parts of the Commonwealth need to do

The Commonwealth needs to be revitalised as a matter of priority, and every group should play its part.

Governments need to assess the value and potential of the Commonwealth. Aware that the Commonwealth is easily mis-understood and ignorantly pre-judged, this assessment should be done in a constructive way, led by Commonwealth-friendly experts who understand and have experience of working with the Commonwealth. Governments should provide training about the Commonwealth *throughout* its civil service – in the ministries of education, health, finance etc - not just the foreign service. Governments should also send more senior and influential diplomats to deal with Commonwealth matters in High Commissions in all Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth Secretariat should design and implement a track one and track two reform process, just as Kofi Annan did in the UN. Track one reforms can be adopted by the Secretary-General without authorisation, whilst track two reforms need the authorisation of Heads. Indeed, this is where the UN could support the UN; it could second some of the UN staff that were involved in designing and implementing such management and budgetary reforms. Moreover, whilst the UN's High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change did not, in my mind, produce any new ideas, it was a fantastic publicity stunt that put UN reform at the top of the UN's agenda. The Commonwealth Secretariat could learn from this.

The Secretariat should also boost its planning division. Without the necessary human and financial resources, planning within the Secretariat is not overarching as it should be; rather there is a culture where divisions are very cagey over their work, rather than collaborative. One criteria for the appointment of the next Secretary-General should be his or her commitment to such a revitalisation.

The Commonwealth Foundation, in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat, should design mechanisms to mainstream civil society input – particularly from women, young people, and other marginalised groups - into all the divisions and programmes of the Secretariat, that are not burdensome on Secretariat staff. The Commonwealth Foundation should facilitate a civil society assessment of the Commonwealth's role in the 21st century and how much it will cost. Some argue that the Commonwealth works efficiently because it has little money and has therefore got to make it go further, but there is no doubt in my mind that it could scale up its work considerably for the benefit of its members.

Civil society should also play its role. We all have a responsibility to raise awareness of the Commonwealth; we have a responsibility not to be insular – not to just circulate reports only to other Commonwealth organisations and ministers responsible for the Commonwealth. We should all strive to work with other non-Commonwealth organisations; we should invite ministers and parliamentarians to see the work you are doing, and how the Commonwealth connection has impacted your work. We should all talk to the media here at the Commonwealth People’s Forum and when we get back home to talk about your experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think it is time to challenge warm words. The Commonwealth is a wonderful idea and a wonderful family with so much potential. As Shridath (Sonny) Ramphal said, the Commonwealth is a tool to be picked up and used. It is the responsibility of each and every one of us, to make sure that we do.

Discussion, question and answers:

Comment: One participant agreed that it was time for the Commonwealth to undergo a make over. The Commonwealth should also focus on creating relationships with other organisations.

Question: Ideally, what would the one off-spring of greater interaction between the Commonwealth and other global actors be?

Answer: That the Commonwealth have greater international clout, and the credibility and capacity to influence international agendas. The two key areas where this should happen should be the MDGs and climate change.

Comment: One participant explained how her small village and Commonwealth fora are voids apart.

Question: How can the gap between community-based organisations (CBOs) and Commonwealth fora be bridged when it is hard enough to engage at local, state, and national levels, let alone international levels?

Answer: It is difficult, but you could try bypassing these layers and take direct action – talk to Commonwealth Foundation staff here and ask them to invite you or a colleague to a Commonwealth civil society consultation. You should also try to develop links with the national British Council office if there is one to avoid any last minute visa complications.

Comment: One participant said that civil society does have momentum in key areas; for example it takes the lead on small island states. Ocean rises are perhaps the most pressing international issues here not terrorism. Small Island States could make a difference by supporting Commonwealth led efforts to focus attention on such issues in order to increase the visibility and priority of global warming on the international scene.

Comment: One participant said that the strength of civil society is that it understands the questions asked of it; it provides strength from below. The Commonwealth means the

most to its millions of global citizens. Whilst small states are not large they have wisdom, and this should be supported by the Commonwealth.

Reply: The panel agreed that small states can be big powers, but also gave anecdotal evidence to show the reality of how small some states are. One panel member explained that when country mission to the UN were analysing Kofi Annan's report In Larger Freedom prior to the UN Summit, the UK mission had six staff members working on each of the four sections – total 24 staff. In the Joint Office of Permanent Missions to the UN, the “small states office”, each room had on average an Ambassador and one assistant. That person, or duo, had to analyse the entire report, as well as attend to every other UN issue – from territorial claims in space, forests, AIDS, trade, education, to regional and economic group meetings such as the G77, CARICOM, the AU etc.

Comment: One participant agreed that scrutiny of the Commonwealth Secretariat is paramount in order to secure accountability. The Secretariat needs to become accountable to the Commonwealth community. The Commonwealth should also focus on the establishment of more high level expert groups to utilise its vast knowledge base of globally influential thinkers. The Commonwealth should help smaller countries to help understand international agreements. Lastly, it should use the strengths of its faith groups, universities and trade unions to engage with the “big guns.” Commonwealth could be host to very powerful allies.

Reply: The panel agreed that the Commonwealth was not very accountable. Comparing the CHOGM process to the UN Summit process, one panel member noted that the UN had regularly posted its updated draft communiqués on the internet for public scrutiny, whereas the Commonwealth communiqué had been kept behind closed doors. At the UN, Ambassador John Bolton of the US Mission was singled out as an individual who wanted single-handedly to delete all reference to MDGs. Such naming and shaming may or may not be suitable in the Commonwealth, but the situation should be improved. The mere posting of a Commonwealth communiqué, post-Committee of the Whole, post-Commonwealth Foreign Ministers and pre-Heads Meeting would not take any research, any funding, or any study. It was one simple step towards a remedy.

Comment: One participant said it was sensible to review the funding of the Secretariat and ask governments for more. The Commonwealth should also create better links to regional bodies.

Question: Could institutions such as DFID, EU and World Bank channel funding through the Commonwealth?

Answer: The Commonwealth is not, and probably should never be, a development agency. There is huge resistance to this, and in any event, the Commonwealth's comparative advantage lies in technical assistance.

Comment: Civil society should be influential in voting of Secretary General and have a % of the vote.

Comment: One participant explained the success that her organisation had had at engaging its own government ministers. More info can be found at www.cpd.bangladesh.org

Comment: One participant noted that the Commonwealth has freedom to network and communicate key issues; it needs to promote understanding of global warming.

Question: How can relevant Commonwealth organisations ie meteorologists play a greater role in this?

Answer: The panel recalled comments made at the previous day's workshop on Climate Change, organised by the Commonwealth Meteorologist's Organisation and the Commonwealth Foundation. There, it was pointed out that climate change was at an advanced stage but that it was a relatively new item on the agenda for civil society and governments; a participant of that workshop had challenged the ability of scientists to communicate important but complicated information on climate change in a digestible way to civil society and leaders.

End