

**From rhetoric to action**  
**youth participation in the Commonwealth**

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Is the Commonwealth a ‘window on the world’ for young people? A survey of existing schemes shows that there are pockets of activity which need to be joined up, so that the Commonwealth utilises all its advantages to promote the role of young people. This article provides an independent analysis on youth participation in the Commonwealth and proposes recommendations to the Commonwealth Heads of Governments and Commonwealth NGOs. The studies quoted in this article are based on detailed research at the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU) which included questionnaires and case studies.

**Youth workshop**

“Survival of the Youngest: Beyond Rhetoric”, a workshop in London on 26 September 2003 brought together representatives of about thirty pan-Commonwealth organisations and members in youth-based schemes. The workshop was organised by the CPSU, the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS), the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council (CYEC) and the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), organisations with varied experiences in this area. Participants shared examples from their work in engaging young people and suggested areas for change in their own organisations.

Recruiting and retaining the interest of young people is a dilemma for a number of pan-Commonwealth organisations. A workshop participant highlighted the need to address “the retention of youth involvement in our programmes”. Several participants commented that developing youth strategies to attract the young as well as sustaining the relationship is critical for the survival of both the official and the unofficial Commonwealth. Recent studies have shown that there is a high level of apathy about the Commonwealth among young people. A questionnaire sent by the Commonwealth Civil Society Project at CPSU to representatives of pan-Commonwealth organisations last year drew out the following reasons why young people are not interested in working for the Commonwealth:

- the Commonwealth’s unattractive image,
- dominance of professional associations among Commonwealth NGOs, and
- lack of follow-up by Commonwealth bodies to young people who have had some exposure to Commonwealth affairs.

The key change suggested at a structural level is to involve young persons as partners and in mainstreaming youth issues. Participants spoke of changes they would like to see in their own organisations in order to involve more young people. These included: organising mentoring programmes, regional courses and training schemes and expansion of existing awards schemes.

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Another issue was the importance of awareness-raising through promotional and educational activities. Such activities are important for bridging the information gulf between the UK and the rest of the Commonwealth. Participants spoke of the need for pan-Commonwealth organisations to work more closely with the CYP at the Secretariat.

### **Young people and the Commonwealth**

The inter-governmental Commonwealth has similar social and economic responsibilities to the United Nations with variously structured units, programmes and divisions. However, both the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation are seriously under-resourced. Despite the lack of resources, the Commonwealth's big strength is that it is an informal 'network of networks' (in the words of former Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku). In this community-focused role, the Commonwealth can play an active part in promoting youth issues.

The importance of engaging youth participation has become a priority in the Commonwealth. This is not surprising as two-thirds of the Commonwealth's population of 1.7 billion are under the age of 29 years. A positive aspect of the Coolum CHOGM was the new emphasis on youth. The March 2002 Declaration on the "Commonwealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" recognises that "the Commonwealth's future lies in the hands of its youth". Current Secretary-General Don McKinnon reiterated this message to the Commonwealth Youth Programme advisory board in October 2002, "My single and most important young message to young people and civil society is this: All Commonwealth governments have agreed that young people should be the core of our development agenda in order to sustain the future of the Commonwealth and its people in the new millennium". Effective and consistent action is now required.

The 1999-2002 High Level Review Group suggested a "Youth for the Future" initiative that has since been launched. The initiative complements existing youth-exchange schemes, drawing on the skills of young professionals and youth volunteers to contribute in a practical way to the Commonwealth. The initiative's four components are: Commonwealth Youth Enterprise Development, Commonwealth Youth Volunteering, Commonwealth Youth Mentoring and Commonwealth Youth Leadership. Peer outreach and support through leadership could produce effective change if the scheme reaches out to young people who do not fall under the purview of structured youth programmes. For instance, other youth networks such as National Youth Councils, tend to remain government bodies.

Sports events act as a magnet to attract the young, as it is one of the most visible of Commonwealth activities. Sport was re-emphasised at the Coolum CHOGM and the mandate of the Commonwealth Committee on Co-operation through Sport was renewed.

The Committee urges governments to include sports assistance in their aid programmes as sport provides health, economic, educational and community-building advantages. Following Manchester, UK in 2002, in 2006 Sydney, Australia will be the venue for the next Commonwealth Games.

Linked to the issue of Commonwealth awareness, is the extent to which young people are able to participate in decision-making structures.

## **Young people and governance structures**

In an interview to the *New Straits Times* newspaper in July 2003, a young Malaysian said, “There should be a regular change in leadership, be it a youth club or a religious organisation. A young person should be given the opportunity to lead, so he or she can motivate people his age” (Philemon Arul, 20, Taiping). His comment was in response to a call by the President of the Malaysian Association of Youth Clubs to the Youth and Sports Ministry for defining youths as aged 50 years and below (an increase from the existing official definition of 15-40 years). The Ministry had proposed regulating all aspects of youth organisation, which would have affected the issue of membership of youth groups.

The age group for defining youth is critical to ensuring the participation of young people in leadership structures. In many countries of the developing Commonwealth, young people shoulder adult responsibilities even before the age of 15 years. However, the official Commonwealth defines young people between 15-29 years while the United Nations defines young people as aged between 15-24.

In practice, there is some variation between these age groups. Two young persons from each of the Commonwealth countries aged between 16-23 years have been invited to participate in the Commonwealth Youth Summit in Edinburgh, Scotland in October 2003. Participants held a three-day youth parliament and visited schools, colleges and universities to talk about their cultures and education systems. This is the first Education Youth Summit aimed at encouraging participation by young people and could set a precedent. In Nigeria, the Commonwealth Youth Forum in Abuja in December 2003 will be another opportunity for young persons to discuss relevant issues. Both meetings will coincide with official events — the first with the Commonwealth Education Ministers Meeting and the latter with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. However, only a small proportion of young people will be involved.

Work through the people’s Commonwealth and corporate governance are other spheres where the young can gain a better understanding about the Commonwealth. Events alongside the 2003 Edinburgh Commonwealth Youth Summit, such as “Showcase Youth” profiling best educational practice, provide an opportunity to bring the various spheres together.

The CYP is unique in providing a platform for young people to articulate their views. The cross-sectoral approach of the Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE) has clearly defined this approach to youth development. CYP consultations with young people from civil society organisations take place at the regional youth forums. Each region elects a regional youth coordinator to present the priorities to the Pan-Commonwealth youth caucus. The Chair of the youth caucus conveys the views at international forums and has equal speaking rights with ministers at the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meetings. Through such a process, young people are able to participate in decision-making on issues that affect their lives.

Pan-Commonwealth organisations focused on rights issues, such as the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative have a higher intake of young people. Youth organisations such as the CYEC have successfully launched exchange schemes. In the UK, over 200 delegates aged between 18-

25 years shared their ideas for the 21st century at the CitizenYou Commonwealth Youth Summit in Sunderland in July 2002. Participants shared their experiences of citizenship and promoted their home communities.

### **Mainstreaming youth issues**

The activities of pan-Commonwealth organisations are focused on specific areas due to their limited outreach. Only 20% of the accredited 69 pan-Commonwealth NGOs operate in all 54 member-states, while 22% operate in less than 30 states. None of the NGOs work across the Commonwealth in all 54 states but many are able to provide a regional presence in the five major areas of the Commonwealth. Activities of Commonwealth NGOs are wide-ranging but fall into clusters of activities: Commonwealth friendship/ service, education, good governance, health, human rights and development, law, media, religion, the built environment, the private sector and youth. Pan-Commonwealth organisations need to make a concerted effort to recruit young people in these areas.

The official Commonwealth has taken a big step in including youth observers in areas such as election monitoring, which has proved effective. 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.

However, the Commonwealth Secretariat should consider how to involve more young people in its work. Internship or placement schemes for young persons would allow the brightest Commonwealth students access to Commonwealth programmes which they could publicise in their own countries, while reducing the Secretariat's workload by providing much-needed support.

### **Recommendations**

At the end of last September's workshop, CPSU, RCS and CYEC called upon Commonwealth Heads of Government at Abuja to renew their commitment to mainstreaming youth issues. This followed the recommendation of the Commonwealth High-Level Review Group at Coolum in 2002 to enhance "people-to-people" links. The three organisations welcomed the invitation to pan-Commonwealth organisations to participate in the Coolum Committee (formerly the Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies) and are calling for a focus group on youth to engage with this committee.

The recommendations below are based on work carried out by these organisations with various partners since the 2002 CHOGM. At the UK pre-CHOGM Civil Society consultation in June 2003, CPSU and CYEC called for the establishment of a youth focus group to interact with the Coolum Committee. These issues were also discussed at the September workshop.

Recommendations to governments:

- Leaders and Commonwealth organisations should adopt a strategy for youth recruitment and engagement;
- The Coolum Committee should include a focus group on youth to discuss issues related to youth and the Commonwealth; and
- Mainstream youth issues into national development programmes and budgets.

Recommendations to Commonwealth NGOs:

- More active involvement of young persons in their governance and management structures;
- Collaborative work among organisations in developing strategies for youth engagement; and
- Within existing budgets, organisations should make provision for youth-related activities while working towards increased fundraising.

**References**

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