



Bridge over trouble water?

The Commonwealth challenge to a divided world

Report on the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit Summer Conference,

Institute of Commonwealth Studies

6-8 July 2005

Introduction

The Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU) Summer Conference is an off-shoot of the three-year Civil Society project that was conducted in 2002. Preparation for the first CPSU Summer Conference began in earnest at the start of April. Fresh out of university, the task of engaging young people in Commonwealth activity was a daunting prospect. On my part, even after four years of university, I knew little about the Commonwealth, its institutions and their function. However, my lack of expertise in Commonwealth studies allowed me to look at subjects that were of great personal interest and see how I could place them in a Commonwealth context.

The target audience was postgraduate students in their twenties with an interest in international relations, globalisation, politics and other related disciplines but other contemporaries were welcome. There were fourteen participants. The CPSU amongst others believes that the dynamism and drive of the Commonwealth youth can be used to cultivate new ideas that will lead to the evolution of the Commonwealth and its institutions.

Methodology

The conference was divided into three days. Each day concentrated on a particular theme and consisted of a morning and afternoon session. At the end of each session, delegates were divided up into small groups of three and four people to discuss the issues raised and topics addressed. The number of delegates allowed workshops to be extremely participatory enabling participants to interact with each other and to share individual experiences on topics as it related to their national country and experiences. As the first CPSU Summer Conference, workshops also gave the CPSU the opportunity to gather feedback after every session.

Day 1: The Commonwealth - A relic of the past or a forum for the future?

Day one focused on the question “The Commonwealth - A relic of the past or a forum for the future?” The aim of this day was to separate the past from the present. Linked to Britain’s colonial legacy, some view the Commonwealth as an anachronism that has outlived its efficacy. The topics covered and experiences of the delegates from each country revealed that the Commonwealth was in fact able to play a decisive role in addressing many of the issues currently facing the world.

The following topics were looked at:

- The political, economic and social values of the Commonwealth and its institutions
- The structure of the Commonwealth

- The current challenges facing the Commonwealth in the 21st century
- Commonwealth Institutions and their function
- Building democratic institutions
- The challenges facing fledging democracies
- Human Rights
- Post conflict resolution
- HIV/AIDS
- Gender Issues

Information Exchange and Networking

The group responded very well to the day's topics. In the morning session there was immediate consensus on a number of issues regarding the Commonwealth and where it was heading in the 21st century. Participants agreed that there was little understanding about what the Commonwealth really is. Thus, from the start, emphasis was placed on how the Commonwealth could engage young people at an early age. It was argued that whilst Commonwealth history is being re-introduced in schools around the Commonwealth, more initiatives should be set up.

Twinning schools in the various countries of the Commonwealth was one popular idea. Whilst some schools have similar schemes in place, with a vast network of developed and developing countries, the Commonwealth should take the lead in this initiative.

Participants believed the result would be two-fold: firstly, children in one region would be able to share their knowledge and perception of the Commonwealth to their peers in another region. Secondly, as bridging the gap between peoples across the globe is important now more than ever, the initiative would foster the exchange of cultures, ideas and values. Live web links between schools and exchange programmes- and university exchanges similar to ERASMUS-would facilitate the success of the initiative. It was also noted that only three hundred places are allocated for the current Commonwealth Youth Exchange programme; more exchanges are needed. Poised to be tomorrow's leaders, a youth forum on the internet should be established for young people in secondary schools to discuss topical issues.

Human Rights and the Spread of Democracy

Delegates agreed that human rights and democracy building were extremely important for the twenty- first century. However, governments and NGOs sometimes have conflicting opinions on how to reach the goal of establishing democracies and upholding the values of human rights. Thus, delegates came to the conclusion that the Commonwealth- its trans-regional network of governments, professional associations and NGOs - should play a greater role in bringing these groups together.

Through its historical experience, delegates concurred that Commonwealth organisations should work with existing local NGOs to monitor conflict 'hot spots'. Commonwealth organisations should position themselves as impartial arbiters drawing together conflicting parties and placing pressure on warring factions.

HIV/AIDS

In South Africa, for example, delegates argued that civil society groups and NGOs are dealing with the formidable task of tackling the HIV/AIDS pandemic whilst the government plays a somewhat supportive role. The consensus was that the Commonwealth should bring all groups together in a forum of open debate.

It was recognized that NGOs are already raising international awareness on HIV/AIDS issues. Participants commended the Ambassadors for Positive Living programme established by the Commonwealth Secretariat Youth Programme. There should also be more use of youth councilors (16 or over) working in both urban and rural areas of developing countries eliminating stigmas and myths behind HIV/AIDS and placing emphasis on sex education.

Issues requiring follow-up

- Increased funding is needed for Commonwealth Institutions.
- More emphasis should be placed on spreading information about the Commonwealth to young people
- How the Commonwealth can bridge the gap between governments and NGOs

Day Two: Small countries and sustainable development

Today, world leaders, NGOs and academics are focusing on the sustainability of global economic development. Subjects such as globalisation, climate change, 'brain drain' and the role of civil society are hot topics of discussion. The second day concentrated on the theme: "Small states and sustainable development" in relation to developing nations within the Commonwealth.

The following topics were looked at:

- The Commonwealth and the globalised world - understanding the challenges
- Climate change and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)
- The world social forum and the Commonwealth people's forum
- Reforming the UN development system

Environmental awareness-building and actions

Delegates considered the question - what can young people do to prevent climate change? Given a brief insight into the CPSU Commonwealth Clubs in Secondary Schools project, delegates believed that the climate change issue should be a key component of the project. It was also suggested that the Commonwealth should use its global outreach to its advantage to raise awareness about this issue. Another interesting idea that came out of the discussion was the establishment of a Commonwealth Earth Day/ Earth Week.

Schools across the Commonwealth would spend the week discussing different environmental issues as related to their respective countries. Demonstrating solidarity and awareness, pupils from different schools would plant a tree on a particular day.

Environmental rallies, campaigns and recycling schemes could take place during this week. Again, live web links should be used to facilitate the initiative. This was one of the more feasible projects. This would lead to an enhanced profile of the Commonwealth and young people playing an active role in protecting their environment. As a side note, The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) could also branch out with financing and technological expertise ready to address the climate change question.

Day Three: Media and multilateralism

The third day focused on the theme: “Media and multilateralism” exploring the role of the media and the role played by journalists operating within the Commonwealth.

In the closing stages of the conference, participants were given insight into existing Commonwealth Youth initiatives and opportunities for young people.

The following topics were looked at:

- The realisation of freedom of speech
- The obstacles facing journalists reporting in African countries
- The role of the youth in promoting the Commonwealth
- Opportunities in the Commonwealth
- The work of Interlocal Solutions

Commonwealth News

Delegates discussed the possibility of a Commonwealth News channel or a ‘Commonwealth Hour’ programme. It was suggested that the French channel TV5 has a similar programme for La Francophonie. News, sport and cultural activities from across the Commonwealth should be broadcasted. Delegates indicated that for the Commonwealth to have a lasting effect it would need to publicise itself better gaining more recognition from governments, NGOs and Civil Society.

Commonwealth Games

As the most well known Commonwealth event, the Commonwealth Games should highlight other issues that the Commonwealth is working on. Sporting stars, for example, could use their popularity to raise awareness on issues such as HIV/AIDS and conflict resolution visiting countries seriously affected. Celebrities are also needed to promote Commonwealth cultural awards targeted at young people.

Youth Parliament

The lack of media coverage of the April Commonwealth Youth Parliament in Brisbane from the larger Commonwealth countries was a concern for the delegates. It was argued

that the media should be used as a tool for young people to have their voices heard. For this to happen, greater coverage of these events is needed. Often marginalised, the youth of today should be given a voice; the Commonwealth must assist in the realisation of this.

Network of Journalists

A Commonwealth network of young journalists should be set up. One popular idea was the establishment of a Commonwealth News Blog. Aspiring journalists would benefit from this in a number of ways. Firstly, they would have the opportunity to test and improve their journalistic skills, writing various articles on topics about their respective Commonwealth countries. Second, young journalists would be able to express their views to their peers who would be happy to share their own views. Third, the blog would allow young journalists to promote themselves. Broadsheet newspapers could also endorse competitions or offer scholarship programmes for the most talented journalists again opening the doors for the young.

Conclusion

On the whole, the conference was a great success. Delegates found the event rewarding and interesting. Not only did they improve their knowledge of the Commonwealth, they also brought fresh ideas to the table. Given the current political climate of the world, delegates believe that the Commonwealth is truly a force for good. Combining past experiences, a transregional network and a working on a united front, the Commonwealth can be an effective bridge over global troubled waters.

List of Participants

Achala	Abeysekara	Ghana
Onomako	Ako	Nigeria
Sheila	Annor	Ghana
Sandra	Brunneger	Austria
Lucy	Butler	British Trinidadian

Stephen	Cope	UK
Joseph	Croft	UK
Georgina	Dadzie	Ghana
Isabel	Hollis	UK
Kofi	Horlali	Ghana
Giselle	Richards	St Helena
Alex	Simuyandi	UK
Huw	Sparkes	UK
Bonnie	Whang	Canada

Questionnaire Results

Percentage of delegates that were 30 or below- 80%

Percentage of Participants that felt the three days was a suitable time period for the conference- 100%

Percentage of participants that felt the conference was held at the right time of year- 100%

Percentage of participants happy to help in the organisation of the 2006 Summer Conference- 80%

Percentage of participants that rated topics as 'good' or 'excellent':

Wednesday- 75%

Thursday - 80%

Friday - 85%

Top five presentations:

1. Introduction to the Commonwealth
2. The Commonwealth and post conflict resolution
3. The Commonwealth from a media perspective
4. "The African case"
5. The work of Interlocal Solutions