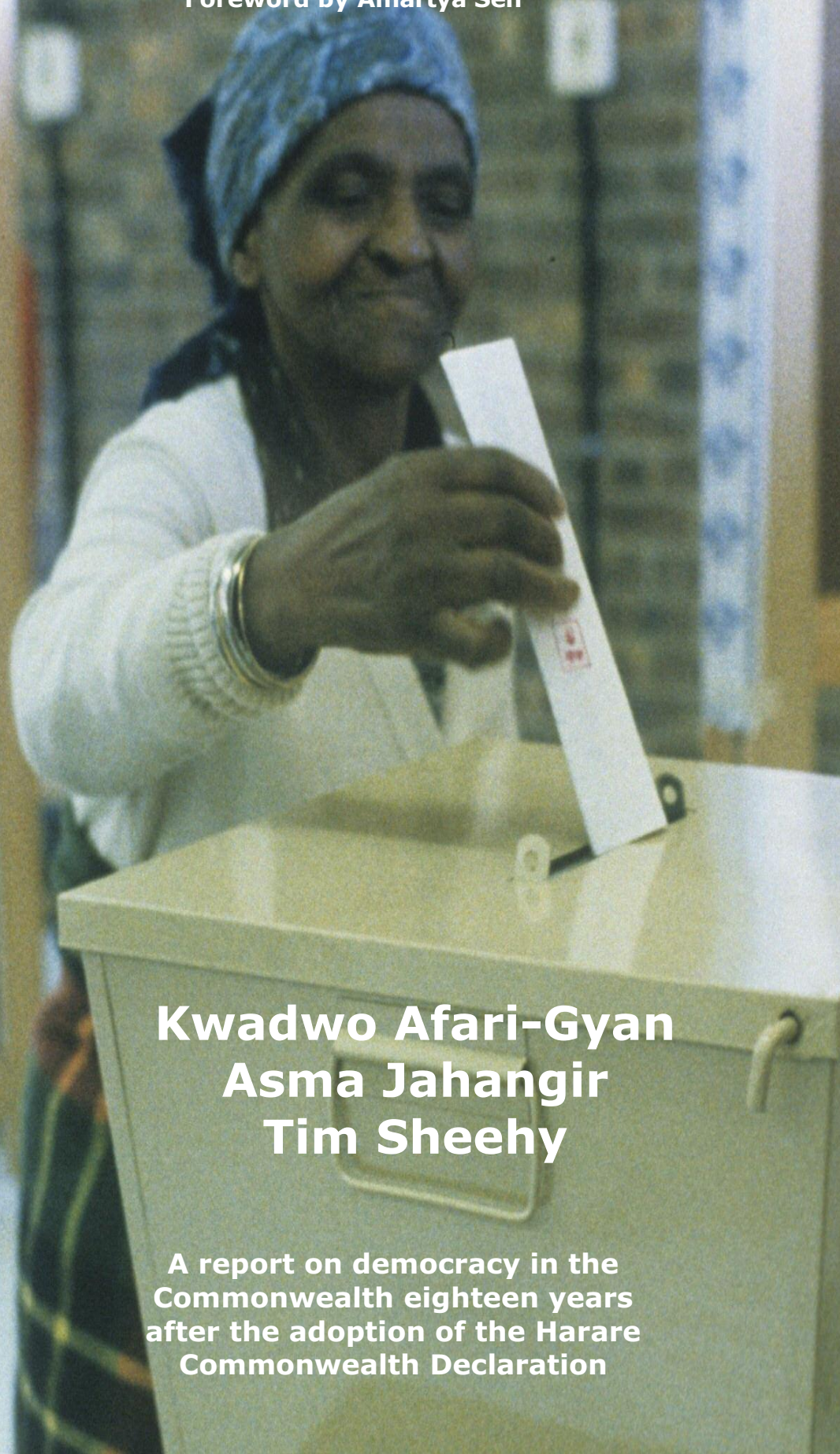


# Democracy in the Commonwealth

Foreword by Amartya Sen



**Kwadwo Afari-Gyan  
Asma Jahangir  
Tim Sheehy**

**A report on democracy in the  
Commonwealth eighteen years  
after the adoption of the Harare  
Commonwealth Declaration**



**This report has been  
commissioned and  
published by the  
Commonwealth Policy  
Studies Unit and Electoral  
Reform International  
Services**

## IN THIS REPORT . . .

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, in November 2009, marks 18 years since the adoption of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, the document which embodies the Commonwealth commitment to democracy. The Commonwealth's promotion of democracy has 'come of age'. This is therefore a particularly appropriate point at which to take stock of the progress that has been made by the Commonwealth in taking Harare forward and to make recommendations for future action.

In this report three Commonwealth experts – Chair of the Ghana Electoral Commission and Executive Secretary of the Association of African Election Authorities Kwadwo Afari-Gyan, Chair of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission Asma Jahangir and British democracy expert Tim Sheehy, the lead writer – consider the quality of democracy in the Commonwealth and the effectiveness of Commonwealth collective action to promote it.

They identify the key obstacle to deepening democracy as being the failure in many Commonwealth countries to encourage or even countenance open political competition, and the abuse of incumbency by ruling parties. The remedy, they argue, must be the establishment of a strong legal and constitutional framework for democracy, backed up by robust institutions and subject to powerful public scrutiny. With this in mind they call for a new and comprehensive Commonwealth statement of democratic principles and practice.

Turning to the effectiveness of collective Commonwealth efforts to promote and deepen democracy, they set out 12 key recommendations, including:

- that member governments should provide a standing invitation to the Commonwealth Secretariat so that it can observe electoral processes, take forward the Secretary-General's 'good offices' work and work with state and civil society bodies without formal invitations each time
- that Commonwealth observers should focus on the quality of democracy and not simply technical electoral issues
- a 'health check' on the state of democracy in every Commonwealth country, at least every two years, and robust follow-up to election observation
- bringing all 'serious or persistent' violations of Harare to the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), closer co-ordination of CMAG with the Secretary-General's 'good offices' work, and of both with civil society
- ensuring that democracy technical assistance is harmonised with the Secretariat's overall political dialogue with the country concerned
- continuing election observation, but shifting the focus of the Political Affairs Division's Democracy Section from the organisation of observer missions to other work to strengthen democracy – including following up the recommendations of observer missions – and ensuring that the Division has adequate resources to promote democracy effectively
- a radical review of the relationship with civil society and a more effective dialogue and engagement with them.

Most of all, the authors argue that the commitment to democracy promotion must be the defining characteristic of the Commonwealth. To that end they call for a broad and generous understanding of democracy, a robust commitment to human rights, courage to dismantle the obstacles to democracy and visionary leadership from Heads of Government.

## ABOUT OUR ORGANISATIONS

### **Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit**

The Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU) think tank was created in 1999 to serve the needs of policy-makers throughout the Commonwealth, with its central institutions, its 53 member states, its vibrant political and economic life, and its numerous civil society organisations.

CPSU's mission is to act as an independent international non-profit making institution for research, analysis and the promotion of ideas, undertaking high quality intellectual work on policy issues affecting significant numbers of states and citizens in the 53-nation Commonwealth. Working with agencies and individuals throughout the Commonwealth, the CPSU aims to research and formulate recommendations for policy-makers in governments, business and non-governmental organisations to identify major policies for the Commonwealth, and to publicise the results of its work. Our work covers four broad issue areas: governance and democracy, economic development and legal reform, civil society and youth, and water and environment.

CPSU is the only policy research unit dedicated to the service of the Commonwealth. It is part of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London. CPSU's website is at [www.cpsu.org.uk](http://www.cpsu.org.uk)

### **Electoral Reform International Services**

Electoral Reform International Services (ERIS) is a UK-based not-for-profit organisation which provides expert advice and assistance on electoral and other democratic arrangements. Its parent body is the UK Electoral Reform Society, which has been working for better elections since 1884. There are some 400 democracy experts on the ERIS database and ERIS has worked in some 70 countries.

ERIS is probably best known for its work on election observation and the training of election observers. From 2003 to 2007 ERIS was the sole provider of observer training to the European Commission and it selects UK election observers on behalf of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for European Union and OSCE election observation missions. ERIS also provides technical assistance experts for election management bodies, civil society organisations and other key democracy institutions, organises various democracy support programmes and activities, and undertakes the project management of multidonor projects.

ERIS has worked with the United Nations, the European Commission and many of the major multilateral and bilateral 'donor' agencies and in partnership with civil society bodies in many countries. In the past it has worked in particular with domestic election observer groups: for the future it plans to focus increasing attention on partnerships with grassroots organisations which are working to prevent election-related conflict. ERIS's website is at [www.eris.org.uk](http://www.eris.org.uk)

**What is the point of the Commonwealth? Is it, in the words of Michael Holman, former Africa Editor of the *Financial Times*, “a dead parrot not worth the effort”? Or does it still have a role in the 21st century?**

**According to the three eminent Commonwealth experts responsible for this report, the answer to this question rests on whether or not the commitment to democracy really does become “a way of life” for the association.**

**Is democracy to be “the defining” characteristic of the Commonwealth? If so, this has profound implications for how the Commonwealth orders its priorities. If not, and the association is perceived to be a comfortable club for autocrats, it is likely to wither on the vine.**

**At present, too many Commonwealth countries fail to encourage or even countenance open political competition. They are unwilling to protect people’s fundamental political rights. Often, the Commonwealth appears to acquiesce in this. There is need, therefore, for a wide-ranging reform of the way in which the Commonwealth promotes democracy.**

**The report suggests how this might be achieved.**

*“The report is important not only for the Commonwealth itself, but also for the world at large, since the Commonwealth’s example and experience can have a significant impact on other countries as well who have similar problems to overcome. By producing this well-reasoned report on a subject of profound importance in the contemporary world, the authors have put us greatly in their debt.”*

*From the Foreword by Amartya Sen, who is Thomas W. Lamont University Professor at Harvard University and received the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1998.*

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