



Joining Up the Commonwealth

**A response to governmental calls for
increased co-ordination with civil society**

**A report by Amanda Shah
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The Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit

CPSU is an independent think-tank for the contemporary Commonwealth of 54 states, and part of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. It began work in 1999 and its main priorities have initially been twofold: on the impact of globalisation, and of the Harare Declaration, 1991. It is currently undertaking work on civil society, indigenous rights and e-commerce. Previous work has included policy briefs prior to Commonwealth Ministerial Meetings, and reports on universities and development, parliamentary oversight of the security sector, professional networking for basic education, election observation and pro-poor public-private IT partnerships. The Commonwealth Civil Society Project is continuing its work into 2003 and more information about its areas of research, as well as a full list of past and present CPSU projects, can be found on the Unit's website: <http://www.cpsu.org.uk>.

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Executive Summary

The report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of State at the March 2002 Coolum summit paid special attention to the important relationship between the official and unofficial Commonwealth, and the ways in which different parts of the Commonwealth family could work together more closely.

CPSU's Commonwealth Civil Society Project has undertaken research on three elements of importance to the civil society recommendations of the High Level Review Group - "mapping" pan-Commonwealth non-governmental organisations, exploring the usefulness of Commonwealth Centres from a civil society perspective and examining Commonwealth accreditation procedures. This report makes 26 recommendations on these areas to both the official and unofficial Commonwealth, the intention being to modernise the culture of the Commonwealth's engagement with civil society.

- CPSU recommends that the official Commonwealth takes the initiative and reaches out proactively to Commonwealth civil society – particularly in the thematic or geographic areas where its engagement is currently weak. This includes engaging with civil society at a national and regional level in Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth's accreditation criteria should be adjusted to reflect this change of emphasis and accommodate a wider range of civil society actors.
- The official Commonwealth should open up spaces for civil society participation in its structures, creating an enabling environment for civil society interest in the Commonwealth to flourish. This approach needs to be adopted at the level of Commonwealth summits, ministerial meetings and amongst its inter-governmental agencies. Minimum acceptable standards for civil society participation should be enshrined as entitlements in the Commonwealth's accreditation procedure, which should be expanded into accreditation to the Commonwealth, rather than just to CHOGMs.
- Pan-Commonwealth NGOs need to increase co-ordination amongst themselves and strengthen linkages with civil society organisations at a national and regional level to avoid duplication of activities, allow for the pooling of resources and increase support for and knowledge of Commonwealth activities. Commonwealth Centres could provide a useful base for increased communication between civil society organisations, government, the media and business sector.
- The official Commonwealth should voice its commitment to civil society participation in its decision making processes, not just in written words but by taking practical steps to ensure round-table dialogue between the different sectors of the Commonwealth community. Such a commitment needs to be over and above any desire to strengthen co-ordination with civil society in order to increase the effectiveness of official Commonwealth activity.

Introduction

The Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU) has since April 2002 undertaken a four-month inception phase project to research and analyse Commonwealth Civil Society, its role in promoting Commonwealth values, in involving citizens in Commonwealth co-operation, and in interacting more positively with inter-governmental agencies.¹ The project has been carried out within the context of the 2002 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the documents it produced,² and the commitments that were made about Commonwealth civil society within them. Whilst Coolum itself was not a memorable occasion for the Peoples' Commonwealth, two out of the three documents produced by Heads of State at the 2002 CHOGM made reference to Commonwealth civil society (only the Coolum Communiqué did not). The CPSU has used these officially stated positions, and the mandate they have given various agencies of the official Commonwealth to work on civil society issues, to shape its work during the inception phase of its Commonwealth Civil Society Project.

What was said about civil society in the Coolum documents?

The Coolum Declaration, on “The Commonwealth in the 21st Century: Continuity and Renewal”, called “on the many intergovernmental, professional and civil society bodies which help to implement our Commonwealth values to join with us [member states] in building closer Commonwealth family links and strengthening consultation and collaboration.” Arguing for “the need for stronger links and better two-way communication and co-ordination between the official and non-governmental Commonwealth, and among Commonwealth NGOs”, the Declaration stated that “this will give Commonwealth activities greater impact, ensuring every programme produces lasting benefit.”

Commonwealth civil society was also taken up by the Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (HLRG) commissioned at the Durban summit of 1999 to map out a vision for the Commonwealth in the twenty-first century.³ The report contains a number of references to Commonwealth civil society and the importance of the Commonwealth as “a large family serviced by a wide variety of organisations that are inter-governmental, semi-

¹ The project has been funded throughout its inception phase by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Commonwealth Co-ordination Department. The project as a whole will last for two years to August 2004.

² The Coolum Declaration, the Coolum Communiqué and the Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government

³ “Heads of Government decided that a High-Level Group should be established to review the role of the Commonwealth and advise on how best it could respond to the challenges of the new century. The group would be chaired by the President of South Africa and include the Heads of Government of Australia, Fiji Islands, India, Malta, Singapore, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. It would report to the next CHOGM in Australia 2001.” (Durban Communiqué paragraph 7). The Fiji Islands was removed from the Group following its suspension from the Councils of the Commonwealth in 2000 and replaced by Papua New Guinea.

governmental or non-governmental in character.”⁴ Section VI of the report is dedicated to “People to People Links: The Commonwealth’s Civil Society.” It gives general recommendations about official/unofficial Commonwealth relations and requires the official Commonwealth to make several time-bound reviews of specific issues concerning civil society.

**Civil Society Recommendations in the
Report of the HLRG:**

- strengthening links between the official and non-governmental Commonwealth (Section VI, Paragraph 48)
- the organisation of Commonwealth professional associations and NGOs into focus groups based on their functional interests, to foster participation in the re-constituted Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies (CCCA) (Sections V and VI, Paragraphs 45.10, 49.1 and 49.2)
- the proposal of a set of sound and consistent criteria for the accreditation of non-governmental organisations to the Commonwealth to be approved by the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Board of Governors in December 2002 (Section VI, Paragraph 49.3)
- the designation (where feasible) by governments of specific Commonwealth Centres (Section VI, Paragraph 49.4)

CPSU has concentrated its inception phase research on three elements of importance to the recommendations of the HLRG:

(i) a mapping of pan-Commonwealth non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

It is not possible for the official Commonwealth to make policy decisions to strengthen its relations with the non-governmental Commonwealth if it is not fully appraised of what the non-governmental Commonwealth is or does. Pan-Commonwealth NGOs are the most visible and Commonwealth focused element of Commonwealth civil society (see section below on What Is The Peoples’ Commonwealth?) For this reason, whilst not diminishing the importance of other manifestations of Commonwealth civil society, CPSU has focused its initial research on mapping the 69 accredited pan-Commonwealth NGOs.

⁴ Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (Coolum, 2002) V 42, p.12

(ii) an exploration of the usefulness of Commonwealth Centres from a civil society perspective

The option suggested by the HLRG for Commonwealth governments to establish Commonwealth Centres presented an opportunity to take stock of the Commonwealth's presence at a national and regional level, and enquire about the potential take-up of designated Commonwealth Centres by civil society. This was done in order to inform governmental decisions about the suitability of setting up Centres from a civil society perspective.

(iii) an examination of accreditation procedure

An inter-governmental organisation's accreditation procedure is an important physical and psychological gateway for its engagement with civil society. The official Commonwealth is required to re-visit this issue by December 2002 and CPSU has examined the Commonwealth's track record, carried out comparative analysis of procedure in different inter-governmental organisations and made suggestions of how the Commonwealth can move the debate forward.

CPSU has conducted its research on these issues through a number of face-to-face, email and telephone interviews with members of the unofficial Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth High Commissions in London. Project questionnaires were sent to all accredited Commonwealth NGOs and those listed in the 2002 Commonwealth Yearbook asking questions about Commonwealth Centres and accreditation. Thirty completed questionnaires were analysed and form part of this report. A project webpage has been active since April 2002 as part of CPSU's website (<http://www.cpsu.org.uk>) containing the project questionnaire, project outputs and a bulletin board of opportunities for civil society interaction with the official Commonwealth. The project has attempted to utilise all existing research undertaken on Commonwealth civil society by academics, civil society and the official Commonwealth – particularly the joint Commonwealth Secretariat/Commonwealth Foundation Review of the Relationship Between the Official and Unofficial Commonwealth Organisations carried out in 2001.

“Mapping” the Peoples’ Commonwealth

This section aims to answer the question “what is the picture of Commonwealth civil society?” to enable policy makers to better decide on routes for increased engagement with the Peoples’ Commonwealth. In order to get to this point it is worth pinning down some important definitional terms: civil society and the Peoples’ Commonwealth.

What is civil society?

Civil society are much used and little understood buzz words that since the fall of the Iron Curtain have gained increasing prominence in development, human rights and governance circles. As Michael Edwards, Director of Governance and Civil Society at the Ford Foundation, puts it “ten years ago, very little was heard of ‘civil society’ beyond the academic cloister, but now the corridors of power reverberate – sometimes literally – with the sound of global citizen action.”⁵

“...the individual and collective actions of people, organised formally and informally between the level of family and state, towards the betterment of society.”

There are a multitude of definitions for civil society most of which focus on its structural and cognitive attributes. Structural definitions highlight the *form* that civil society takes: organisations and associations between the level of family and the state with the exception of business and (in some definitions) the media. Structurally it is also clear that civil society is much more than NGOs. NGOs and civil society are not interchangeable words. Faith groups, trade unions, community based organisations, peoples’ movements, networks and alliances, advocates for social causes, professional associations, NGOs...there is a non-exhaustive list of civil society mobilisations some of which were recognised in last year’s Commonwealth Peoples’ Communiqué coming out of the Brisbane Commonwealth Peoples’ Festival.⁶

Cognitive definitions stress the *importance of norms* (social values and actions assumed to bring about a society that is ‘civil’). Within a Commonwealth context, the Director of the Commonwealth Foundation has stressed the importance of the nature of values by describing civil society as,

“the sum total of those actions that people take, individually and collectively, that, if not for the ‘common

⁵ “The Rise and Rise of Civil Society”, Michael Edwards, Developments: The International Development Magazine (Issue 14) (DfID, 2001)

⁶ The Commonwealth Peoples’ Communiqué is available at <http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/news/news.cfm?id=248>

good’ or ‘common wealth’ are at least not detrimental to the ‘common good’ or ‘common wealth’.”⁷

Our understandings of civil society actions are permeating so fast that attempts to pin down their definition and content are always going to be subject to academic and practical revision. However a practical working definition used in this study for policy purposes sees civil society as the individual and collective actions of people, organised formally and informally between the level of family and state, towards the betterment of society.

What is the Peoples’ Commonwealth?

Publicly the Commonwealth is keen to play up its unique composition as an association of states and an association of peoples. The HLRG felt Commonwealth civil society to be a “valuable asset that gives the Commonwealth a depth and reach that is unique,”⁸ a Commonwealth Secretariat pamphlet of the previous year enunciates that “an important part of [the Commonwealth’s] tradition is the Peoples’ Commonwealth.”⁹ The Commonwealth Secretary-General recently referred to “non-governmental organisations, poverty action groups, women’s organisations, environmental groups and other civil society organisations” as “reflecting the broad rainbow of the Peoples’ Commonwealth.”¹⁰

“...the collection of unofficial or non-governmental organisations that work around the Commonwealth on issues of concern to Commonwealth citizens.”

The Peoples’ Commonwealth is often referred to when the Commonwealth is describing its comparative advantages in the modern competitive world. It is certainly coveted by other international organisations such as *La Francophonie* which has yet to gain a distinctive civil society element.¹¹ However as is the case with “civil society”, despite being a much used term there is still confusion about what the Peoples’ Commonwealth is, what it does and where it does it. Known interchangeably as the unofficial Commonwealth, the non-governmental Commonwealth and Commonwealth civil society, the Peoples’ Commonwealth simply put is the collection of unofficial or non-

⁷ The Asia Commonwealth Lecture 2001: Civil Society, Social Accountability and Governance, Colin Ball (CAMHADD, 2001), p.4.

⁸ Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (Colum, 2002) VI 46, p.16

⁹ The People’s Commonwealth: Commonwealth Associations at Work (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001)

¹⁰ “McKinnon welcomes civil society input to Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting” Commonwealth News Release 02/54

¹¹ Claire Auplat (Associate Fellow, CPSU) in a forthcoming article for The Round Table lists 31 international NGOs found on the website of *La Francophonie* but cautions that “they have in fact been coordinated by UNESCO and some of them have no specific links with *La Francophonie*.”

governmental organisations that work around the Commonwealth on issues of concern to Commonwealth citizens.¹²

The Peoples' Commonwealth is often erroneously understood as the 69 pan-Commonwealth non-governmental organisations that have accredited status to CHOGMs. Some governmental and inter-governmental officials see these 69 as enough civil society to have to cope with, partly due to a lack of understanding about the Peoples' Commonwealth, its constituent parts and what they have to offer. However as well as these NGOs working at a pan-Commonwealth level, the Peoples' Commonwealth includes the hundreds of thousands of civil society organisations working at a local, national and regional level within and between Commonwealth countries.

Nevertheless, the most visible aspect of the Peoples' Commonwealth are the 69 officially accredited pan-Commonwealth organisations which work on issues from health to human rights, development to dentistry, meteorology to museums and forestry to family planning. The commonalities that link these accredited organisations are that they

- all have Commonwealth in their name¹³ and
- all purport to have pan-Commonwealth governance and programmes (see section below on accreditation).

That said the differences between pan-Commonwealth organisations, in size, capacity, area of work, location etc., are more pronounced than their similarities. Despite a list of accredited organisations compiled by the Secretariat,¹⁴ the diverse nature of pan-Commonwealth organisations makes them difficult for policy makers to pin down or map out, something that inevitably precludes fuller interaction.

What do they do?

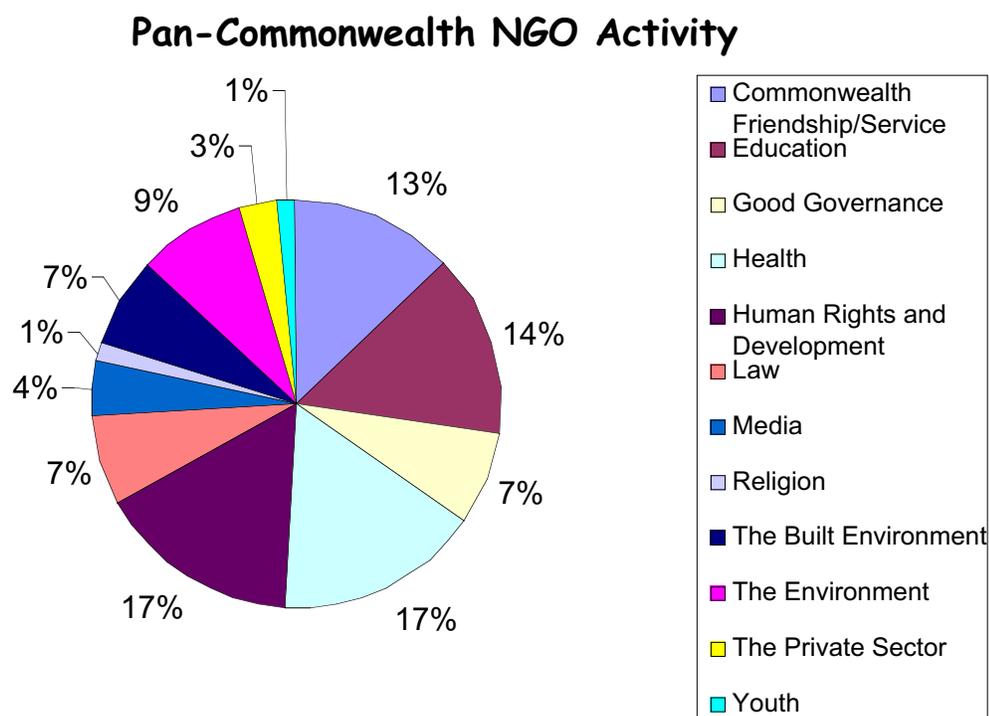
Annex one lists all pan-Commonwealth organisations accredited to the 2002 Coolum CHOGM, the abbreviations by which they are known and the dates when they were founded. A sizeable number were established before the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Foundation in 1965 and some even before the historic Indian decision of 1949 that heralded the arrival of the modern Commonwealth. Initially using “colonial”, “imperial” or “empire” instead of Commonwealth, 16 organisations (not all now with accredited status) pre-date the London Declaration and 28 organisations pre-date the Commonwealth's intergovernmental agencies, the first Commonwealth non-governmental organisation being the Royal Commonwealth Society, established as the Colonial Society in 1868.

¹² The interests of the Peoples' Commonwealth may not always be the interests of the official Commonwealth. Often this is the case, but the Peoples' Commonwealth may also work to put issues onto the official Commonwealth agenda that are not currently worked upon, recognised or given any priority, an example being the Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples and its work on indigenous rights.

¹³ With the exception of the Royal Over-Seas League.

¹⁴ The NGO Desk Officer keeps a list of all accredited pan-Commonwealth NGOs and their contact details.

The activities of the pan-Commonwealth NGOs are wide-ranging but fall into a number of major clusters: Commonwealth friendship/service, education, good governance, health, human rights and development, law, media, religion, the built environment, the environment, the private sector and youth. Annex two lists the 69 NGOs as they fall under these headings.¹⁵



There are obvious connections between some of these clusters and areas of Commonwealth activity and/or opportunities for civil society access. For example clusters around human rights and good governance, health, education and law have official counterparts in the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group and Commonwealth Health, Education and Law Ministers Meetings, as well as departments within the Commonwealth Secretariat. The cluster involved in Commonwealth friendship/service is a predictable grouping and includes some of the oldest pan-Commonwealth organisations in a range of activities encouraging promotion of the Commonwealth, ties between Commonwealth people, and services to Commonwealth citizens. Notably whilst there is a Commonwealth Jewish Council no similar organisations exist for the Commonwealth's other faiths. There is also no organisation dedicated to bringing different faith groups together in dialogue despite a number of Commonwealth members (including Nigeria, the UK and India) experiencing inter-religious tension.

¹⁵ Many of the organisations discussed have areas of interest that straddle more than one heading, for example the Commonwealth Trade Union Council works on issues of human rights and development as well as the private sector. For research purposes NGOs were placed under what was felt to be the most appropriate heading although it is possible that NGOs might have differing views than those concluded in this study.

Further gaps emerge if areas of non-governmental activity are compared with areas of official Commonwealth activity. The HLRG report states that the Commonwealth “has come of age as a force for conflict resolution, democratic freedoms, good governance, sustainable development and for meeting the needs of small states.”¹⁶ There are some clear correlations between this list and the activities of pan-Commonwealth organisations in democratic freedoms and good governance (human rights/development, good governance, media) and sustainable development (human rights/development). Clear patterns vis-à-vis conflict resolution and the needs of small states are less visible particularly in comparison to other areas such as Commonwealth friendship/promotion, health and education that seem over-populated.

Another gap in the areas of work undertaken by accredited Commonwealth NGOs is related to the age of their constituency. A significant number are supported by an increasingly ageing membership and have so far failed to attract the interest of younger generations. For some organisations “younger generations” would include anyone under 45 years of age. This tells a clear message about the legitimacy of certain organisations in a Commonwealth where two-thirds of citizens are under 29 years of age. For various reasons (including areas of work, a focus on the professions, membership rates etc.) many accredited organisations are not working in areas, or in ways, that are of interest to young people. The risk to the longevity of these organisations, unless there is an increasing orientation towards issues that affect and attract younger people, is clear.

There is an assumption, stemming from the history of the Peoples’ Commonwealth, that the pan-Commonwealth organisations are all professional associations. There are however a significant number of issue-based Commonwealth organisations including the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, the Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples, the Commonwealth Association for Local Action and Economic Development and the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council. There is some evidence to suggest that these single-issue organisations are better able to capture the imagination and support of younger people than traditional professional associations.

There has also been a marked rise since the end of the 1980s in the number of organisations emerging from larger international bodies. The Organisation of Commonwealth United Nations Associations (OCUNA) was the first attempt by an international organisation (the World Federation of United Nations Associations) to form a smaller Commonwealth sub-set and gain accreditation by adding Commonwealth to its name, using its branches in Commonwealth countries to gain pan-Commonwealth presence, and meeting in the wings of its international governance meetings.¹⁷ OCUNA has been followed by Disabled Peoples International (Commonwealth Committee), the Commonwealth Group of Family Planning Associations, the Soroptimist International Commonwealth Group and the Association of Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections (ACAIS). All of these organisations bring with them their own constituencies

¹⁶ Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (Coolum, 2002) II 7, p.2.

¹⁷ The practice of convening on the fringe of other international meetings, is also used by the official Commonwealth, with ministers meeting in the wings of UN and other global gatherings.

and in the case of some, such as ACAIS, a significant number of young people. The question now is how organisations such as ACAIS can get their younger members interested and involved in their specifically Commonwealth activity. One step forward would be the adoption by all accredited organisations of a youth mission prioritising their commitment to involving young people within the organisation and laying out ways in which this would be most appropriate within their particular area of activity.

Where are they based and where do they operate?

Three-quarters of accredited NGOs (52 organisations) base their secretariats in the UK leaving only a quarter of pan-Commonwealth NGOs (17 organisations) headquartered in the other 53 countries that make up the association of nations. Reasons for this include historical ties, the Commonwealth's residual anglocentricity,¹⁸ the location of the Commonwealth's institutional mechanisms and the practical need to be located close by for lobbying purposes. The impact of this over-location in the UK is to weaken the Commonwealth's capability to promote itself and its fundamental values in the other 53 member states. It also impinges on the credibility of the Peoples' Commonwealth.

However because an organisation is based in the UK does not mean it is not useful, or is not maintaining close contacts within other member states. A number of pan-Commonwealth organisations are federations of bodies with strong national or regional branches around the Commonwealth. Many operate on an individual membership basis, with members dispersed throughout the Commonwealth, and more still carry out work throughout the Commonwealth's five regions. The problem with relying on these organisational frameworks is that whilst on paper the organisations involved have a "presence" through an affiliated body, an individual member or a project of work in different countries, this does not add up to much of a permanent institutional presence for the organisation or for the wider Commonwealth away from the UK. A member of a trade union in South Africa, for example, is not more aware of the Commonwealth or trade union issues in other Commonwealth countries because COSATU participates in the Commonwealth Trade Union Council.

Using data from 2000, recent research undertaken by Claire Auplat (Associate Fellow, CPSU) has found only 20% of pan-Commonwealth NGOs to be active in all 54 member states. The majority - 58% - are active in between 30 and 50 countries, with 22%, over one in five, being active in less than 30 states. This clearly modifies what might be assumed from the current official Commonwealth accreditation criteria, which require pan-Commonwealth programmes.

Some pan-Commonwealth organisations have taken steps to locate, relocate or open branch offices outside the UK and there is a permanent Commonwealth non-governmental presence (not all of which are pan-Commonwealth organisations) in 16 Commonwealth countries other than the UK. The majority of these are found in Asia

¹⁸ See forthcoming article by Amanda Shah in CHRI News which will be available at <http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org>

(offices of eight organisations), followed by the Caribbean/Americas (seven organisations), the Pacific (six organisations), Africa (five organisations) and Europe (two organisations). One Commonwealth organisation (not pan-Commonwealth in nature), the Commonwealth Association of Geneva, is based in a non-Commonwealth country – Switzerland.

Commonwealth Organisations Outside the UK

A number of Commonwealth non-governmental organisations, not all pan-Commonwealth in their make-up, are located in sixteen member states outside the UK:

Australia - Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, Commonwealth Professional Centre, Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples

Canada - Commonwealth Association of Museums, Commonwealth Judicial Education Institute, Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management

India - Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, Commonwealth Veterinary Association, Commonwealth Chess Association, Commonwealth Historians Society

Jamaica - Commonwealth Library Association, Commonwealth Professional Centre

Kenya - Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa

Malaysia - Commonwealth Association for Local Action and Economic Development, Commonwealth Professional Centre

Malta - Commonwealth Professional Centre, Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development

New Zealand - Association of Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections, Commonwealth Association for Corporate Governance, Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management

Nigeria - Commonwealth Professional Centre

Singapore - Commonwealth Geographical Bureau, Commonwealth Professional Centre

Sri Lanka - Commonwealth Professional Centre

Switzerland - Commonwealth Association of Geneva

Trinidad and Tobago - Commonwealth Women's Network, Commonwealth Professional Centre

Uganda - Commonwealth Professional Centre

Zambia - Commonwealth Professional Centre

Zimbabwe - Commonwealth Association for the Education and Training of Adults

The Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA) was the first Commonwealth professional association to locate its headquarters in a developing member state, establishing its secretariat in Jamaica in 1973. COMLA has been followed by a number of other pan-Commonwealth NGOs including the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) which was founded in London in 1987, switched its headquarters to India in 1993 and opened its African office in Ghana in 2001. CHRI's growth sends a clear message that relocation away from London can work and can in fact enhance an organisation's operations benefiting its multinational membership. Such a development shows that a Commonwealth NGO is determined to work across the Commonwealth and where the need for its services are greatest, opening up new funding opportunities and raising an individual profile for the organisation. Following a discussion at its first

conference in 1983 and a decision at Abuja in 2001, using CHRI as an example the Commonwealth Journalists Association is in the process of relocating its headquarters from London to Port of Spain in Trinidad. Other examples of a non-governmental Commonwealth presence outside the UK include the Commonwealth Association of Professional Centres with its secretariat in Australia and eleven centres dotted throughout the Commonwealth (see section below on Commonwealth Centres).

Those organisations that wish to remain in the UK for strategic, professional or financial reasons also have opportunities to strengthen their pan-Commonwealth reach. Increasing membership outside the UK, building up the capacity of national affiliates to undertake Commonwealth work, and encouraging regional representation to Commonwealth events outside the UK, rather than sending UK delegates, all help create a more complete pan-Commonwealth reach. These points also ring true for pan-Commonwealth NGOs based outside the UK which may have to work at increasing their representation in other Commonwealth regions.

As well as looking at where non-governmental Commonwealth organisations are based geographically, the project has examined where these organisations are physically located. Ten of the 69 pan-Commonwealth organisations have postal addresses beginning “c/o”. This suggests that at least 14.5% are piggy-backing on other, usually national, organisations for office space and resources. Surprisingly two of the 69 have postal addresses at the Commonwealth Secretariat - one in the Education Department and another in the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Division. This would on paper suggest a very close and unconventional relationship between a non-governmental and inter-governmental organisation, between which one might expect a greater degree of independence.

A number of the organisations have located their headquarters in the same building. For example, the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association and the Commonwealth Press Union are both based at 17 Fleet Street, London, whilst Commonwealth House in south London is home to the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers, the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council, the Commonwealth Linking Trust and the Council for Education in the Commonwealth. Such arrangements can make good financial sense and help raise the profile of the Commonwealth by creating a “centre” for Commonwealth non-governmental activity (see section below on Commonwealth Centres).

Why should the official Commonwealth engage with the Peoples' Commonwealth?

Having mapped out the parameters of the Peoples' Commonwealth in 2002 and considering the strengths and weaknesses that it represents, what does the Peoples' Commonwealth have to offer the organisation as a whole and why should the official Commonwealth want to engage with it?

The Commonwealth is not a big player. Its official agencies have limited budgets and resources – staff capacity is diminishing.¹⁹ The HLRG was about considering the organisation's strengths and working to them, sun-setting other activities that for financial or practical reasons no longer made good sense. In this climate the official Commonwealth has to look outside itself and draw on the range of resources available to the association, not least through the non-governmental and business Commonwealth. A joining-up of the Commonwealth and its resources in this way is long overdue and vital if the organisation is to rise to the competition it faces with other international organisations.²⁰ That the Commonwealth has been around for 53 years is not a reason for it to be around for the next 53. Its needs to justify its existence, and in both resources and legitimacy the unofficial Commonwealth can add value. The Commonwealth Foundation's Civil Society Advisory Committee gave voice to this reality in their Johannesburg meeting prior to the Coolum summit: "by engaging the peoples of the Commonwealth...the Commonwealth will achieve the relevance it seeks and considerably enhance its international standing."²¹

There are clear practical and strategic reasons why the Peoples' Commonwealth is of great significance for the wider Commonwealth. It is understood that the recent joint Commonwealth Secretariat/Foundation review of official/unofficial Commonwealth relations recommended engagement with the Peoples' Commonwealth for the following reasons:

- its level of commitment to Commonwealth principles and values
- its specific Commonwealth-wide civil society networks
- among professional associations, its engagement from a development perspective with the professions
- for single-issue organisations, its unique engagement with issues from a Commonwealth perspective
- the provision of points of contact for the Commonwealth and wider global community.

In terms of service-provision, subcontracting work to the non-governmental sector (with systems already set up and staff already trained) is also often better value for money than undertaking projects in-house.

Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, has recognised that "the United Nations once dealt only with governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving governments, international organisations, the business community and civil society. In today's world, we depend on each other."²²

¹⁹ From four hundred to under three hundred officials at the Commonwealth Secretariat in just over a decade.

²⁰ In Australia's Commonwealth Summit: A briefing on issues before the leaders at Coolum in March 2002, Amanda Shah argues that "depending on how it [interaction between the governmental and non-governmental] is handled, it threatens to make or break the relevance of the Commonwealth in the 21st century." (CPSU-SAIIA, February 2002), p. 33.

²¹ Statement on the Commonwealth High Level Review, (Civil Society Advisory Committee (CSAC) of the Commonwealth Foundation, Johannesburg 22 February 2002)

²² Kofi Annan, Address to the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, 31 January 1998
http://www.un.org/partners/civil_society/home.htm

Similarly, a report by the North-South Institute, on inter-governmental attempts to engage civil society in the American hemisphere, found that with the OAS,

“transparency and accountability have become part of the organisation’s new lexicon, and bringing civil society into its halls reinforces those commitments.”²³

The Commonwealth is battling for governmental interest and finances, as well as public profile, against other inter-governmental organisations, the OAS included, which have taken steps to bring civil society into the heart of their being. This has real and very tangible impacts on an inter-governmental organisation’s status. As one OAS official put it, “to have credibility and legitimacy you have to have people involved.”²⁴ No inter-governmental organisation has developed a perfect formula for its engagement with civil society. There is scope for policy shifts and room for the Commonwealth to define itself as a global pioneer in this regard.

Recent academic research has sought to categorise inter-governmental organisations based on their attitude to governance and civil society participation. They were graded according to whether they were “weak” or “strong” in terms of influence and power and “facilitating” or “obstructing” to civil society. The researchers concluded that for strong inter-governmental organisations with little provision for civil society participation “NGO activity has often taken the form of protests/demonstrations, which escalated dramatically in 2000-2001.”²⁵ To date the Commonwealth has escaped large-scale civil society protests because it is not been viewed as a strong institution and has not attracted attention. However these are changing times. In the present global climate people are demanding greater political participation as a fundamental tenet of global good governance. Inter-governmental organisations, traditionally the meeting place of states, have had to redefine themselves not as clubs for governments but as an arena for round-table dialogue between the different stake-holders that make up their communities – governments, civil society, the business sector and the media. All inter-governmental structures (especially those with a trade, financial or developmental remit) without a high degree of civil society participation, are being targeted by civil society protests. The anti-globalisation protests planned around the aborted 2001 CHOGM in Brisbane could be a precursor to what the Commonwealth can expect if it does not effect a policy shift towards increased meaningful engagement with civil society.

An element of tension is however a vital ingredient in (inter-)governmental/civil society relations regardless of the degree of engagement achieved. A “discomfort” zone,²⁶ along with a recognition that both parties will not always be singing from the same hymn sheet, needs to categorise (inter-)governmental/civil society engagement. There is a failure to recognise this crucial nexus in the report of the HLRG. The report implies that

²³ Engaging with Civil Society: Lessons from the OAS, FTAA and Summits of the Americas, Yasmine Shamsie (North South Institute, 2000), p.6.

²⁴ Engaging with Civil Society: Lessons from the OAS, FTAA and Summits of the Americas, Yasmine Shamsie (North South Institute, 2000), p.6.

²⁵ “Civil Society and Global Governance: The Possibilities for Global Citizenship”, Michael Muetzelfeldt and Gary Smith in Citizenship Studies Vol. 6, No. 1, 2002, p. 68.

²⁶ Phrase used by Chief Secretary to HM Treasury the Rt Hon Paul Boateng MP during his opening speech at the 2002 CFMM Global Civil Society Consultation, 22nd July 2002, London.

governments and civil society should pull together and increase co-ordination towards the fulfilment of joint aims and the promotion of the Commonwealth. Whilst this is a laudable aim it fails to recognise the ethos of civil society participation as being important in itself rather than as a by-product of a different aim i.e. helping “to give Commonwealth activities greater impact.”²⁷ It also fails to frame participation within the language of rights. There are many examples of pan-Commonwealth NGOs which whilst remaining engaged with the official Commonwealth in a co-operative manner, have openly criticised it for various policies and positions. Such a level of independence is vital if civil society is not to be co-opted and lose its value for society as a whole. The challenge is how inter-governmental organisations such as the Commonwealth can harness the interest of civil society and use the “discomfort” zone to engage actors within the decision-making process, rather than disenfranchising civil society and leaving protests outside the organisation’s structure as the only avenue for those wishing to voice their concerns.

There is of course the danger of “demosclerosis”²⁸ – the paralysing effect brought about by civil society overload on democratic processes unable to cope with the demand. The UN system has, to an extent, experienced such overload since the introduction of more relaxed requirements for consultative status following the Rio Earth Summit (there are now 2,143 NGOs in a form of consultative status with the UN’s ECOSOC). However, the Commonwealth has yet, and is unlikely in the near future, to inspire huge interest by global civil society on a consistent level rather than just at CHOGMs. With this in mind “demosclerosis” will remain more of a threat than a reality. A more realistic threat is the antipathy of civil society to the Commonwealth. As an organisation the Commonwealth has been spoilt by the range of civil society bodies mandated to work specifically on Commonwealth issues. This has led to a complacency that does not address the question, “Why should civil society engage with the Commonwealth?” Civil society organisations’ time and resources are finite and decisions have to be made as to the best possible cost-benefit when allocating staff and money. If the Commonwealth does not widen its avenues for meaningful civil society participation, organisations could decide that they are better off engaging with other decision-making fora whether that be at the national, regional or global level. This has already started to happen with CHOGMs, where some accredited NGOs feel the benefits (in terms of policy change, profile raising etc.) accrued by engaging with the CHOGM process are not worthwhile. If some accredited pan-Commonwealth NGOs are beginning to doubt whether CHOGMs are worthwhile, it is unlikely that the rest of Commonwealth citizenry think they are or even know what a CHOGM is.

²⁷ Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (Coolum, 2002), VI 48, p.15

²⁸ Term coined by US journalist Jonathan Rauch and cited in Engaging with Civil Society: Lessons from the OAS, FTAA and Summits of the Americas, Yasmine Shamsie (North South Institute, 2000), p. 8.

Recommendations

To the Official Commonwealth:

1. The official Commonwealth needs to reach out proactively to civil society in areas where the Commonwealth's engagement is currently weak. Lessons should be drawn from the attempts of other inter-governmental organisations and from the Commonwealth's own experience e.g. civil society consultations around the 2002 Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting. Contacts from the Commonwealth Foundation and pan-Commonwealth NGOs should be used as a base upon which to expand contacts.
2. Spaces should be opened up for civil society participation within the structures and events of the official Commonwealth to encourage civil society interest in the Commonwealth.
3. Greater practical co-ordination needs to be fostered by the official Commonwealth with clusters of Commonwealth civil society activity, especially those areas that correspond with official Commonwealth priorities e.g. through the current efforts of the Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies (CCCA) at organising focus groups. Practical examples of increased co-ordination could include: a database of unofficial Commonwealth skills, capacity and activities to be used across Commonwealth agencies, a participatory email listserve for civil society/official Commonwealth updates in themed areas, input from civil society to official meetings in the same functional area.

To the Peoples' Commonwealth:

1. Pan-Commonwealth NGOs need to increase co-ordination amongst themselves to avoid duplication of activities and where possible, to allow the pooling of resources towards joint goals.
2. Linkages should be strengthened between accredited pan-Commonwealth NGOs and civil society organisations working at the national or regional level.
3. Pan-Commonwealth NGOs should build-up their reach by establishing offices in different regions, building up the capacity of national/regional affiliates, strengthening membership and using local representatives in meetings outside the UK.

4. Pan-Commonwealth NGOs need to set-up strategies aimed at attracting and retaining the interest of young people in pan-Commonwealth organisations and their work. Advice should be sought from the Commonwealth Youth Programme and Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council as well as organisations that have carried out successful youth strategies e.g. the Royal Commonwealth Society and the its youth bursaries.

Commonwealth Centres

The HLRG report recommended that “where feasible, Commonwealth governments should designate specific Commonwealth Centres within their countries to disseminate information about the Commonwealth and organise special events and occasions like Commonwealth Day.”²⁹ The responsibility was clearly left with national governments to decide how and in what ways it is best to carry forward this recommendation, depending upon national circumstances and facilities already available for Commonwealth promotion.

“...physical buildings around the Commonwealth where elements of the Commonwealth family (whether governmental or non-governmental) undertake Commonwealth activity and promote the association through their presence and their work”

The HLRG recommendation itself takes heed of a suggestion that is understood to have come out of the Commonwealth Secretariat/Foundation joint study on official/unofficial relations. The study suggested that Commonwealth Centres be established in every Commonwealth country, serving as Commonwealth representational missions, information centres, and providing facilities for meetings and lectures.

The basic understanding of a Commonwealth Centre used in this CPSU study has been of physical buildings around the Commonwealth where elements of the Commonwealth family (whether governmental or non-governmental) undertake Commonwealth activity and promote the association through their presence and their work. However the concept of a Commonwealth Centre takes on very different dimensions in the UK as opposed to other countries of the Commonwealth. London in particular is suffused with Commonwealth centres, either through the premises of accredited pan-Commonwealth NGOs - including the Commonwealth Institute,³⁰ the Royal Commonwealth Society and the Royal Over-Seas League - (all of which have substantial public spaces for meetings, receptions, lectures etc.), academic institutions such as the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, or the buildings of the UK-based inter-governmental agencies at Marlborough House. Outside the UK, as the earlier section on “mapping” points out, a sustained inter-governmental or non-governmental Commonwealth presence is much harder to find.

What does the Peoples' Commonwealth think about Commonwealth Centres?

By placing the recommendation about Commonwealth Centres within the section on “People to People Links: The Commonwealth’s Civil Society” the HLRG implied that a

²⁹ Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (Colum, 2002) VI 49.4 p.16.

³⁰ It has recently been suggested that the Commonwealth Institute should be transferred to Cambridge and transformed into a Commonwealth Centre for Education, associated with the Faculty of Education.

strong non-governmental input was envisaged in their plans for Commonwealth Centres. As part of the questionnaire sent out by the CPSU to Commonwealth organisations (for more information see introduction) questions were asked about Commonwealth Centres, the aim being to ascertain whether civil society was receptive to the HLRG's recommendation.

Twenty-four out of thirty respondents (80%) felt that a Commonwealth Centre would help promote the profile of the Commonwealth in their country. Only three felt that a Centre would do nothing to promote the Commonwealth's profile and three had no opinion. Even in the UK, where there are a number of established Commonwealth centres of activity, the vast majority felt that a Commonwealth Centre would be a positive addition. This is perhaps surprising, as one of the problems in raising the Commonwealth's profile in the UK is the disparate nature of Commonwealth organisations – governmental and non-governmental. It would therefore make sense to develop one of the existing centres into a Commonwealth Centre, an aim of which would be to draw together the variety of UK-based Commonwealth activity undertaken by a range of actors.

When asked what their organisations' would use a Commonwealth Centre for, the most common answer was information resources (nearly a half of all answers), followed by space for meetings and functions (30%). Renting office space and Commonwealth Day activities lagged behind with seven votes apiece. Other reasons for using a Commonwealth Centre included

- a one stop shop for all Commonwealth functions – official (political, economic, developmental), informational and NGO
- promoting Commonwealth activities
- assistance and sponsorship
- a commercially managed building in London for all Commonwealth NGOs to rent office space
- networking with NGOs and Commonwealth professionals and
- a locus for furthering human rights awareness and concerns.

Other potential uses for Commonwealth Centres (not all directly referred to by respondents) are

- as a base for CFTC Officers
- a venue for Commonwealth officials and delegates from other Commonwealth countries to give addresses
- a young people's centre hosting youth clubs, using the in-house ICT resources and with a strong focus on sport and citizenship education
- a base to raise awareness of the Commonwealth and the role of the host country within the Commonwealth
- a nexus through which to develop pan-Commonwealth NGOs and link them with local civil society organisations.

The importance attached to any Centre providing information resources highlights the sometimes isolated nature of Commonwealth NGOs, especially those outside the UK. A

Centre with a suite of computers with Internet connection, telephones, fax facilities and a photocopier would go a long way towards providing the resources to overcome this isolationism and create stronger links between Commonwealth NGOs and governments. Such Centres should also be provided with up-to-date publications from the inter-governmental and non-governmental Commonwealth.

The lack of significance given to Commonwealth Day activities at Commonwealth Centres could either mean that organisations have their own Commonwealth Day traditions deeply embedded and therefore do not need the facilities of a Commonwealth Centre, or that they do not rate Commonwealth Day activities in their work. One organisation commented that whether they used the Commonwealth Centre for hiring office space or meeting rooms would depend on its cost effectiveness vis-à-vis other commercial options.

This underlines the fact that Commonwealth Centres (whether newly created or set up as part of existing organisations) will have to be viable commodities. This does not only mean offering competitively priced services, but marketing themselves to the Commonwealth (and non-Commonwealth) community. For the most part Centres will not be able to rely on any indigenous Commonwealth community to use their premises/services and in many countries one of the purposes of a Commonwealth Centre would be to increase the Commonwealth-aware community. The Centre would therefore be unable to rely on a ready-made group of Commonwealth people without working hard to increase its potential constituency, and for this reason must engage cross-sectorally with the governmental, non-governmental, media and business communities. This could be one of the strengths of Commonwealth Centres, the potential for bringing the different facets of the Commonwealth together. Commonwealth Centres are therefore of significance to another aim of the HLRG to “strengthen links between the official and the non-governmental Commonwealth...to give Commonwealth activities greater impact.”³¹

Using the idea adopted by several pan-Commonwealth NGOs of piggy-backing off existing institutions, organisations were asked whether they knew of places in their own countries that could host a Centre or whether an entirely independent Centre would be preferable. Answers ranged from Commonwealth Professional Centres, Commonwealth Youth Programme Regional Centres, Commonwealth NGOs, governmental departments with a focus on Commonwealth affairs, United Nations offices, inter-governmental Commonwealth agencies, universities, national cultural centres and British Council offices.

Piggy-backing is becoming an increasing characteristic of Commonwealth activity, both governmental and non-governmental. Another output of the HLRG has been the idea to hold Commonwealth Foreign Ministers Meetings in the wings of UN General Assembly meetings. Whilst a practical solution to a range of logistical and financial issues, tying Commonwealth organisations and events into other institutions could negate their Commonwealth quality and diminishes publicity for the Commonwealth. Any

³¹ Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (Coolum, 2002) VI 48 p.15.

government considering establishing a Commonwealth Centre should weigh up these arguments before deciding to locate it within the premises of another organisation as well as taking heed of the experience of the Commonwealth Foundation in establishing Commonwealth Liaison Units (CLUs) in the 1980s/90s. One of the reasons CLUs were not successful is that they lacked a clear identity of their own and became subsumed into host organisations.

In Australia suggestions for piggy-back organisations were the Australian Professional Centre and the Commonwealth Youth Programme South Pacific Centre; in Zimbabwe an independent centre was favoured but other examples included the Commonwealth Journalists Association, teachers colleges, UNDP and the Ministry of Higher Education; in Canada the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management, the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Commonwealth Judicial Education Institute and Commonwealth of Learning were mentioned; New Zealand organisations went for an independent centre or universities; and in India CHRI, the British Council and the India International Centre were mentioned.

In the UK the Commonwealth Institute was most favoured (seven votes), followed by the Royal Commonwealth Society (four votes), the Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth Secretariat (three votes each), Marlborough House or an independent centre (two votes each) and the Royal Over-Seas League (one vote). Interestingly participants picked up on the original and as yet unfulfilled vision for Marlborough House as a centre for Commonwealth activity. Marlborough House is yet to be transformed from anything other than regal settings for two of the Commonwealth's inter-governmental agencies. It is currently not open to the public without prior arrangement, which surely negates any claim to being a Commonwealth Centre in its present incarnation.

Organisations based outside the UK were asked whether there is an existing Commonwealth Centre in their country or in fact whether there was any other Commonwealth organisation (governmental or non-governmental). What marked the answers to these questions was organisations' lack of knowledge about other types of Commonwealth presence in their countries. For example all respondents from New Zealand stated that there were no other Commonwealth organisations in the country – this is quite obviously not the case. In fact there are three – the Association of Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections, Commonwealth Association for Corporate Governance and Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management. One Australian respondent thought that there were no other Commonwealth organisations in the country when the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, Commonwealth Association of Professional Centres, Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples and the Commonwealth Youth Programme South Pacific Centre are all based there. None of the Canadian respondents could identify all six Commonwealth organisations based in Canada – the Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management, CHOGM Committee on Co-operation through Sport, Commonwealth Association of Museums, Commonwealth Judicial Education Institute, Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance and

Commonwealth of Learning – whilst respondents from India and Zimbabwe loosely mentioned other NGOs or sports associations in their countries. This suggests a lack of interaction, co-ordination and communication between Commonwealth NGOs and supports the need for Commonwealth Centres to act as information resources. Notably some respondents did mention organisations which though not based in their countries obviously had an active presence there, for example one Australian organisation thought that there were many Commonwealth NGOs in Australia but that they represented people rather than premises. An interesting question is whether these organisations in fact have better links and co-ordination with national civil society organisations than with others at a pan-Commonwealth level.

Previous “Centres”

There are two precedents establishing Commonwealth centres of activity that are worth considering and which could serve as models for any future set-up: Commonwealth Professional Centres and Commonwealth Youth Programme Regional Centres.

The Commonwealth Association of Professional Centres (CAPC) was established as a pan-Commonwealth NGO in 1996 with the support of the Commonwealth Foundation. It links the eleven remaining Commonwealth Professional Centres (CPCs) based in Australia, Jamaica, Kenya, Malaysia, Malta, Nigeria, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda and Zambia.³² The movement to create these Centres began in 1967 under the first Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, who saw a strong logic in providing institutional foci for professional communities around the Commonwealth when the Foundation was already supporting the development of pan-Commonwealth professional associations.

According to the Commonwealth Foundation the aims of the CPCs were:

- to promote professional co-operation at the national level
- to offer practical facilities to newly formed, small and poor professional societies through shared accommodation and secretarial services
- to encourage an interdisciplinary approach to problems of education, training and relations with schools and universities
- to foster professional co-operation with governments.³³

The Centres were not all fashioned out of the same mould. Instead the Commonwealth Foundation supported different institutions and structures according to national needs. Some of the different strategies used to set them up could be considered by national governments founding Commonwealth Centres in the light of the HLRG. Existing buildings were used for Commonwealth countries “with a growing entrepreneurial class and a large, wealthy professional community”; in Malta, Kenya and Guyana the construction of brand new buildings was funded; in several countries a plot of land was

³² There were originally seventeen centres - the current eleven plus Barbados, Darwin Australia, Guyana, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and the UK.

³³ The Commonwealth Foundation: A Special Report 1966 to 1993 (Commonwealth Foundation, 1993), p. 16.

offered to professionals by their respective governments; reduced rent accommodation was offered in Trinidad and Tobago, Sri Lanka and Singapore.³⁴

The Centres do not all function in the same fashion, but usually they provide offices and lecture rooms, newsletters and professional directories as well as a convenient access for governments and other organisations regarding matters of professional activity, and a point for interdisciplinary professional communication.

The CPCs, with an expanded role, offer excellent potential hosts for Commonwealth Centres in the countries in which they are already present. It would seem nonsensical to set-up additional Centres in countries (or event regions) that already have CPCs and it is likely that to do so would detract from the impact of both. If CPCs are to be used as Commonwealth Centres a clear strategy would need to be considered for how a Professional Centre would serve as a Commonwealth Centre - simply ascribing a CPC the title of “Commonwealth Centre” without making financial, programmatic and marketing changes will not work.

Part of the structure of the Commonwealth Youth Programme (the youth department of the Commonwealth Secretariat) includes four regional offices for Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the South Pacific, located in Zambia, India, Guyana and Australia. These Centres offer a permanent official Commonwealth presence in the countries in which they operate. This point was also taken up by the alliance of non-governmental organisations that prepared A New Vision for the Commonwealth in response to the HLRG report. The New Vision document suggested that whilst “the creation of the Youth Programme in 1973 and the establishment of four Commonwealth Youth Centres were steps in the right direction” their activities “have always lacked resources and visibility.” It urges that “the Commonwealth must always be seen to work on the ground” and calls for the Youth Programme and the Centres “to be considerably expanded and given resources to publicise their activities and those of the Commonwealth in the region.” It recommends that the private sector can be of help here and cites the Centres in India and Zambia as making efforts in this regard.³⁵ Whilst governments might wish to consider using the CYP Regional Centres as the basis for Commonwealth Centres, the message of the New Vision document is a clarion call to all governments considering founding Commonwealth Centres. Without sufficient resources or adequate marketing it is unlikely that the Centres will develop into viable commodities. In this regard attention should be paid to the recommendations of previous Commonwealth reports particularly the 1997 Ingram report and its recommendations on how the Commonwealth is perceived in its different regions and how the Commonwealth’s image could be sharpened.

It is clear that for any Commonwealth Centres to be successful, governments should take advice and consult cross-sectorally on whether a national or even regional centre would be most appropriate. It could be that Centres established in smaller Commonwealth member states such as the Pacific Islands, would be more successful than those in larger

³⁴ The Commonwealth Foundation: A Special Report 1966 to 1993 (Commonwealth Foundation, 1993), p. 16.

³⁵ A New Vision for the Commonwealth (2002), p.16.

countries such as India. In India there are already a number of institutions which, although with no Commonwealth focus, carry out similar functions to any proposed Commonwealth Centre. Any Commonwealth Centre set up in this environment would need to clearly demonstrate how it would be distinct and of use to the local community. It would be easier to find a niche for a Commonwealth Centre where there is less competition. Learning from the failed experience of the Commonwealth Foundation's CLUs, Commonwealth Centres will need to be locally driven and serve local needs. One of the reasons the CLUs spluttered out in the early 1990s was because they were operated as an initiative coming from London. Government initiatives to found Commonwealth Centres will need to take cognisance of the support of civil society, and other sectors in that region for using a Centre. The results of the CPSU questionnaire analysed above provide a useful overview at the beginning of this process.

Recommendations

To the Official Commonwealth:

1. National governments should undertake national/regional surveys of current sites of Commonwealth activity and enquire whether they would form appropriate hosts for Commonwealth Centres.
2. Debate should be initiated by national governments amongst civil society, the business community and the media about the utility of a national/regional Commonwealth Centre and the functions such a Centre could usefully undertake within a national/regional context.
3. The Commonwealth Secretariat should consider ways in which the original mandate of Marlborough House as a centre for Commonwealth activity could be fulfilled.

To the Peoples' Commonwealth:

1. Commonwealth civil society needs to encourage governments to initiate debate about the utility of national/regional Commonwealth Centres and where such Centres could be based.
2. Pan-Commonwealth NGOs headquartered outside the UK should consider whether they could host a Commonwealth Centre.

Accreditation

History

Civil society participation in the structures of the official Commonwealth was aided at the Limassol CHOGM, by the establishment of an NGO accreditation system, the result of nearly twenty years lobbying by individuals inside and out of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Until 1993, civil society representatives wishing to access the Summit could only do so if they also had press credentials and could gain a press pass. Civil society organisations were not recognised by the official Commonwealth and therefore had no standing in terms of participation in and around CHOGMs or any other official Commonwealth activity.

At Limassol for the first time an NGO accreditation system allowed accredited NGOs to qualify for inclusion in the Secretariat's "Directory of Commonwealth Organisations" which gave certain prescribed points of access. The utility of accreditation for pan-Commonwealth NGOs is attested to by the huge rise in the number of organisations that have applied for and gained accreditation since 1993:

| Year | CHOGM | Number of accredited representatives | Number of NGOs fielding representatives |
|------|-----------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1993 | Limassol | 34 | 15 |
| 1995 | Auckland | 71 | 18 |
| 1997 | Edinburgh | 275 | 61 |
| 1999 | Durban | 249 | 50 |
| 2001 | Brisbane | 236 | 51 |
| 2002 | Coolum | 50 | 23 |

Both the number of NGO representatives and the number of NGOs fielding representatives peaked at Edinburgh in 1997 – the first year a Commonwealth Peoples' Centre was organised as part of the Summit. The huge rise in accredited organisations from Auckland to Edinburgh suggests that when spaces for civil society engagement within an inter-governmental organisation are opened, civil society interest in the organisation and its work increases. Conversely the "no-frills" Coolum CHOGM resulted in the lowest levels of NGO participation since 1995.

What is Accreditation?

Criteria

Commonwealth criteria for NGO accreditation (and it is always NGOs that are referred to not civil society) are two-pronged. Organisations are required (a) to have Commonwealth in their title, and (b) to be pan-Commonwealth in their programmes and governance. The

only exceptions to these requirements are the Royal Overseas League (which does not have Commonwealth in its name) and the organisation representing the host CHOGM country's national NGOs (which is not pan-Commonwealth in nature), usually the national NGO umbrella organisation, for example SANGOCO at the Durban CHOGM.

All accredited NGOs are allowed up to six representatives, the names of which have to be submitted to the Secretariat roughly six months prior to the Meeting. The NGO coalition representing the host country's NGOs is allowed 12 representatives, however these names are selected in consultation with the host government.³⁶

Process

The management of accreditation is handled from within the Commonwealth Secretariat (as the administrative wing of the organisation from which accreditation is being sought) and co-ordinated by the NGO Desk Officer. Theoretically, organisations fulfilling the Commonwealth's criteria are automatically granted accredited status. However the "process" of accreditation is rather less automatic. Requests for accreditation are received by the NGO Desk Officer who then forwards them to an internal Management Committee with a request that accreditation be granted. No NGOs fulfilling the criteria have ever been denied accreditation and the NGO desk officer has never, through pressure emanating from either the Secretariat or directly from any government, been forced to remove names from the Directory. However this process is completely lacking in transparency and accountability. That the decision of whether to admit an NGO is ultimately down to an internal committee on a non-regulated basis leaves the whole process open to pressure by governments. That no criteria-fulfilling NGO has to date been barred from the Directory is of little comfort. It takes limited imagination to see how this process which is not open to public scrutiny could be manipulated to suit personal and political priorities.

Entitlements

It is clear that accreditation does not bring vast rewards – there is no access for accredited NGOs to the executive sessions of Heads of State, the Committee of the Whole or the Heads retreat. Instead NGOs are offered a string of practical initiatives to facilitate their activities within the specific framework of what the official Commonwealth perceives participation should be. Non-accredited NGOs have to work outside this framework.

Accredited organisations are given an NGO pass that allows access to:

- an NGO lounge usually located next to the media centre. The lounge usually has a PC with Internet connection, printer, phone, fax and photocopying facilities
- the NGO Desk Officer for assistance. The Desk Officer and supporting staff should have a separate office next to the NGO lounge. Petitions made by NGOs for circulation at the CHOGMs are passed by the NGO desk officer to the conference

³⁶ At the start of the accreditation process local Commonwealth Liaison Units were also entitled to six accredited representatives.

secretary for approval. No petition has been rejected for circulation but the Desk Officer is entitled to do so on a discretionary basis.

- information by way of the NGO desk officer
- invites to events defined by Commonwealth Secretariat literature as “such occasions as the Opening Ceremony, briefings by the CHOGM Spokesperson, other press briefings and appropriate social events.”

A Need for Change?

The HLRG report recommended that “there should be stronger and better-structured relations between the official and unofficial Commonwealth.” It mandated

“the Secretary-General in consultation with member governments [to] propose a set of sound and consistent criteria for the accreditation of organisations as pan-Commonwealth NGOs, and for their accreditation to Commonwealth Ministerial meetings and CHOGM, for the approval off the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Board of Governors in December 2002.”³⁷

The report goes on to suggest that at a minimum, organisations seeking accreditation should be

- committed to the Commonwealth’s fundamental values
- represent the true diversity of Commonwealth countries
- be transparent in their activities
- be open to all Commonwealth members.

There is plainly a recognised need to re-assess the Commonwealth’s management of civil society participation, conceptualised in the form of accreditation. The New Vision document sets out that “the codifying of good practice...is building a reputation for the Commonwealth...it is appropriate now for the Commonwealth to lead the way in showing how official agencies can work in partnership with civil society and business sectors.”

As part of the research for this project a questionnaire was sent out to almost one hundred non-governmental organisations that focus on the Commonwealth (see introduction for more details) asking questions about what civil society thought were appropriate accreditation criteria, entitlements and processes

Only two of the organisations that responded to the questionnaire stated that existing Commonwealth criteria for accreditation were adequate.³⁸ It appears that most pan-Commonwealth (and other) NGOs would favour a fresh look at accreditation criteria. It is likely that data collected from a wider sample of Commonwealth based civil society

³⁷ Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (Colum, 2002) VI 49.3 p.16

³⁸ One of those even expressed the caveat “bearing in mind the limited access and facilities afforded” by accredited status.

organisations would accentuate this finding as by nature accredited NGOs are likely to be more conservative about the need for change as the process has worked for them.

Change in Criteria

One of the key reasons why the time is right for a re-assessment of accreditation, nearly ten years after it was first introduced, is that experience has shown that the current criteria are inappropriate

For example, having the word Commonwealth in an organisation's title is not a suitable criterion for accreditation. The official Commonwealth, or any other body, has no legal rights over the use of the word "Commonwealth" – a point that was amply demonstrated when a cyber squatter took the URL "CHOGM2001" before the Brisbane summit. Recent Commonwealth Foundation research involved a search of the word "Commonwealth" on the Google search engine and yielded 2,320,000 hits – many of which had nothing to do with the Commonwealth of Nations. There have been deliberate attempts by organisations to use the word Commonwealth as a means of gaining legitimacy and entry into the Commonwealth's structure. For example the Commonwealth Foundation experienced some problems during its experiments with CLUs in the early 1990s when several NGOs, trying to gain credibility and status, established themselves as "Commonwealth" organisations and put themselves up as local CLUs. The Commonwealth Secretariat is aware of attempts by some organisations to offer "Commonwealth" training programmes fraudulently for large sums of money. The reason this criterion is used as a basis for accreditation is that it is meant to imply a Commonwealth focus or affiliation; something which it does not and cannot do. It therefore is an unsuitable criterion for the Commonwealth Secretariat to use.

Research undertaken by Claire Auplat (see earlier section on "mapping") has shown that only a minority of accredited "pan-Commonwealth" NGOs - 20% - operate in all 54 member states, 22% operate in less than thirty states. The idea of NGOs working across the Commonwealth in all member states is a misnomer. What is really meant by pan-Commonwealth reach is a regional presence in each of the five major areas of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Secretariat needs to be clearer about what it means by pan-Commonwealth programmes and governance, not only to be more specific about what it defines as pan-Commonwealth (i.e. regional presence) but also to create a minimum requirement for organisations with patchy representation.

Nothing can be done to control usage of the word Commonwealth and attempts to define organisations as pan-Commonwealth are by and large unsatisfactory. If the official Commonwealth is trying to regulate access to Commonwealth meetings, funding or information, it would do better not to focus on these benchmarks, but to be clearer about the other criteria that are required of accredited civil society organisations.

Noteworthy principles suggested by questionnaire respondents for accreditation criteria were that organisations should:

- *promote the Commonwealth and its values as enunciated in the Harare Declaration/ have a Commonwealth focus to their activities/ be involved in areas of interest to the Commonwealth/ work towards improving the lives of Commonwealth citizens*

If the official Commonwealth wants to use accredited non-governmental organisations to help it promote the Commonwealth and its fundamental values it would make sense to require their commitment to engaging with the Commonwealth and upholding the Harare Principles. A useful addition would be a commitment to promoting Commonwealth Day and its theme.

- *be accountable and transparent in their work/ demonstrate diversity in their governance structures/ have significant representation in the Commonwealth*

Requirements for accountable and transparent governance are essential and entirely in keeping with civil society demands for governments and the business community to adopt the same principles. Several accredited NGOs receive and dispose of substantial sums of money in grants, membership subscriptions and service provision fees. Open and accountable financial records with narrative statements and documents to back them up are therefore essential and required, for example, of all civil society organisations with charitable status in the United Kingdom and many other Commonwealth countries.

- *not duplicate the work of other Commonwealth organisations*

Adding to the Commonwealth in a distinct field could also be a practical requirement for accredited status. This is especially relevant with the current Commonwealth zeitgeist for streamlining and capitalising on resources. For the non-governmental Commonwealth community this would impact on the predominance of organisations operating in certain fields, and the lack of organisations working in areas of significance to the modern Commonwealth. Amongst the cluster working on private sector issues is one - the Commonwealth Business Council – that is mandated by and reports to Heads of Government. This poses questions about the boundaries of what the Commonwealth defines as a non-governmental organisation, both in terms of to whom the organisation is accountable, and also the blurring of distinctions between civil society and the business sector.

Some questionnaire responses also made it apparent that certain organisations have a hazy understanding of non-governmental organisations, or the concept of the Peoples' Commonwealth. When asked about appropriate criteria for accreditation, one respondent stated that organisations should “have objectives etc. agreed by the Commonwealth Secretariat, to have Commonwealth Secretariat representation on its council and for the Commonwealth Secretariat to agree its annual work plan.” Another respondent thought that being “funded by member governments would seem appropriate” for NGO accreditation to the Commonwealth. These views contradict the usual definition of a non-governmental organisation as being independent, non-partisan and non-political. Interestingly, one respondent linked accreditation to the membership status of the country in which the NGO is based, stating

“if their government is a Commonwealth member then the country NGO should have automatic membership. This NGO Commonwealth membership can be retained if countries are subsequently suspended.³⁹ If the country is expelled then this may present long term difficulties.”

The responses gathered by the CPSU are understood to have backed-up the results obtained by the joint Commonwealth Secretariat/Foundation review of official/unofficial relations. As with the CPSU’s data, it is understood that the Secretariat/Foundation review found promoting/adherence to Commonwealth values, geographic scope of work, accountable and transparent practices, substantial interest in the Commonwealth, not duplicating the work of an existing organisation and linkages with official Commonwealth organisations all dominated suggestions by respondents. Other suggestions included registration and good standing in its country of origin, strong networks, presence/achievement in developing countries and a basis in membership.

The most obvious area of weakness with the Commonwealth’s current accreditation criteria is that they ignore the majority of Commonwealth civil society – the hundreds of thousands of civil society organisations that work below the pan-Commonwealth level. The official Commonwealth does not recognise these organisations making it difficult to advance its engagement with them systematically. The New Vision document underlined this deficiency, saying “steps should be taken to explore ways of properly recognising and accrediting a wide variety of NGOs, those working across Commonwealth countries and those operating at national and regional levels.”⁴⁰

There has been an over-reliance by the official Commonwealth on treating accredited pan-Commonwealth organisations as the whole of, or representative of, Commonwealth civil society; to use the accredited NGOs as a shield behind which the great mass of civil society organisations do not need to be engaged with, partly because the 69 are more documented and identifiable⁴¹, more Commonwealth-focused and more easily vetted. Whilst there have been pioneering steps away from this position, by the Commonwealth Foundation, departments within the Commonwealth Secretariat and some pan-Commonwealth NGOs, there is no consistent official approach towards Commonwealth civil society at a national or regional level. There is a real need for clearer policy channels and procedures. In fact a reliance on pan-Commonwealth organisations and a lack of understanding of wider civil society underpinned the recommendations of the HLRG. The HLRG report referred to the “large number of officially recognised pan-Commonwealth professional associations and NGOs” and continuously refers to “Commonwealth professional associations and NGOs” rather than civil society. This is a dated approach and echoes the UN’s stance on accreditation (or consultative status) prior

³⁹ It is believed that Chief Anyaoku devised the formula “suspension from the councils of the Commonwealth” to make clear that while a government might be suspended, its people and civil society links with the rest of the Commonwealth should not be.

⁴⁰ A New Vision for the Commonwealth (2002), p.14.

⁴¹ The NGO Desk officer keeps a widely circulated list of all accredited NGOs whereas it would be physically impossible to compile a comprehensive list of civil society organisations in Commonwealth countries.

to the 1996 revision of ECOSOC guidelines for NGOs, a result of the influx of NGOs given consultative status for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.⁴² Arguably the Commonwealth's approach, intentionally or otherwise, also hinders effective official/unofficial relationships and stymies the potential engagement of civil society with the Commonwealth system.

One solution would be a two-tiered system: one tier being a reworked version of existing accreditation but for accreditation to the Commonwealth rather than CHOGMs, the second a scaled-down accreditation process around Commonwealth meetings for the many focus-specific, or national level organisations, who wish to work with the Commonwealth on certain occasions. The Commonwealth could also consider the approach of the OAS which based its accreditation system on that of the UN's ECOSOC guidelines, on the premise that its members had already agreed it within the UN system.

A revamping of the existing accreditation process into accreditation to the Commonwealth, rather than to CHOGMs, could form the basis of a Commonwealth NGO Kitemark. This would be a symbol that all organisations accredited at this level would be able to use alongside their own logo. Not only would this bring added publicity for the Commonwealth "brand" but it would act as a symbol of excellence for NGOs, that they could use as it grows in recognition, to help lever support from other international organisations as well as international funders.

Change in Entitlements

The flip side of criteria for accreditation is of course the entitlements that accredited status brings. The Concluding Statement from the Royal Commonwealth Society's 2002 International Meeting states "that any tightening of accreditation procedures for NGOs at the CHOGM should be reflected in greater access to the substance of the meeting." There is a strong feeling that any narrowing of the hoops through which organisations must jump to gain accreditation must be accompanied by an increase in the benefits accreditation accrues. Considering the benefits accredited status brings this should not be difficult – one respondent likened accredited status to having access to use the toilets at CHOGM.

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative argues that the HLRG report "appears to have missed one of the main points, which is not who gets accredited but what kind of participation results from accreditation."⁴³ It is particularly prescient to consider the type of official/unofficial relationship which accreditation should foster away from

⁴² Before the guidelines were revised, a narrow conceptualisation of NGOs - which sought to link the term non-governmental organisation (found in Article 71 of the UN Charter) with ECOSOC consultative status - unnecessarily "constrained rather than extended the development of governance/civil society relations in the UN context." *Civil Society and Global Governance: The Possibilities for Global Citizenship*, Michael Muetzelfeldt and Gary Smith in *Citizenship Studies* Vol 6 No 1, March 2002, p.64.

⁴³ [Response to the High Level Review Group Draft Communiqué](#) (CHRI, 2002)

Commonwealth summits. If the wish of the HLRG, to increase co-ordination between the official and unofficial Commonwealth, is to be made a reality then it is not enough for accreditation to talk only of officially recognised interaction every two years at CHOGMs. Whilst engagement between the official and unofficial Commonwealth occurs now between CHOGMs – both at ministerial meetings and through day to day interaction – it is important for the official Commonwealth to consider elaborating on accreditation entitlements to underwrite these (and other) interactions. This would create a firm platform from which both the official and unofficial Commonwealth can progress their relationship.⁴⁴ For this reason accreditation should take the form of accreditation to the Commonwealth, rather than just to CHOGMs, as it currently stands.

The CPSU questionnaire asked NGOs about the entitlements that accredited status should bring. Major themes from the key responses were:

- prioritised funding
- access to information
- input/access to official Commonwealth events
- access to officials for consultation/advice
- access to Commonwealth consultations/social events/collaborative projects.

◆ Funding

Whilst the need for increased funds highlights the funding vulnerabilities of many Commonwealth NGOs, and an understandable desire for the official Commonwealth to increase access to funding, it also demonstrates a misunderstanding about the Commonwealth's capacity. One thing the official Commonwealth shares with its unofficial counterpart is a lack of funds.

As funding is such a continuing issue for large sections of the unofficial Commonwealth, and the grant making agencies of the official Commonwealth are stretched, the association needs to think beyond direct financing as a means of increasing capacity, to other forms of assistance. For example the Commonwealth Foundation should consider spending some of its resources not on grant making but in skills training for civil society organisations applying for funds. This could take the form of professional development training for individuals that could then be passed down through colleagues within organisations to build up an in-house bank of knowledge. The Foundation could use its long experience in grant making to offer advice about, and supply contacts with other (inter-)governmental and private donors in the different sectoral areas the unofficial Commonwealth works in. Staff from major donors - or those, such as the UK's Department for International Development, who have signalled an interest in the

⁴⁴ One way would be through amendments to accreditation procedure, another would be through the establishment of civil society guidelines to underscore the official Commonwealth's commitment to encouraging meaningful civil society participation in the organisation's decision-making spaces. This idea was favoured by the Foreign Policy Centre's 1999 report which called for "a civil society compact, a Harare Declaration for civil society." *Reinventing the Commonwealth*, Ford, Kate and Katwala, Sunder (Foreign Policy Centre, 1999), pp.38-39. See also CPSU's submission to the CCA at <http://www.cpsu.org.uk>

Commonwealth - could be asked to take part in the training and give advice on applications to their particular funding body. Accreditation in its expanded form, as suggested above, could allow preferential access to these and other skills training sessions (in advocacy, networking, civil society/government interaction, new developments in the Commonwealth etc.) run by the Foundation which could be held at NGO Forums, Commonwealth Peoples' Centres and in different regions of the Commonwealth. Accreditation could also lead to preferential status in the queue for official Commonwealth grants.

The proposal that the Foundation should run professional development training could be linked in with any revision of accreditation criteria. What training needs to be given to enable civil society organisations to live up to higher standards? This should be seen within the context of building up the capacity of civil society organisations, to work as practical and strategic partners with the governmental Commonwealth. It is important to remember that the official/unofficial dynamic is not just one way – civil society organisations may need training but they can also train. The official Commonwealth should view Commonwealth civil society as sources of information and skills (in their area of expertise, on civil society, on countries where they are based or work etc.) when considering training for Commonwealth officials, or when seeking information to inform Commonwealth positions.

◆ Access to Events

Another major concern voiced by questionnaire respondents was their desire for more access to events and information. At present accreditation is specifically for CHOGMs and as such offers access to events around the periphery of the Heads of Government Meeting. Accreditation should be upgraded to accreditation to the Commonwealth and include accreditation to ministerial meetings, consultations and the inter-governmental agencies.

CHOGMs are known and valued for bringing Heads of State together with Heads of State. They could also be known for bringing Heads of State together with civil society (and the business sector) in an informal and constructive environment. Just because the Commonwealth has scored one “hit” with its informal retreats, does not mean it should not continue to modernise and ask what can the Commonwealth offer that no other inter-governmental organisation can? Other inter-governmental organisations are adopting the retreat style ethos, increasing competition for the time and attention of Heads of State; the reasons for them to attend inter-governmental summits therefore have to be increasingly persuasive.⁴⁵ In an era of notably violent clashes between civil society and inter-governmental institutions, constructive interaction with civil society could be a major draw.

⁴⁵ The 2002 G8 Summit went back to basics, following the death of a protestor by security forces in Genoa in 2001, and returned to the original concept proposed by the French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing: a "fireside chat" between world leaders.

Within the CHOGM format, room should be made on the first day of executive sessions for an open session with accredited civil society representatives. The 2002 Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting (CFMM) will include a special session where civil society representatives present the findings of a series of regional civil society consultations. An open session should be worked into every ministerial meeting. At present the level of civil society participation varies greatly between ministerial meetings. Minimum acceptable levels of civil society engagement should be standardised and innovative ideas translated to other ministerial meetings and CHOGMs e.g. open plenary sessions, free access to the media, pre-meeting events at which civil society can influence agenda setting, the solicitation of NGO submissions and consultations between NGOs and officials.

Civil society participation should be contrasted and brought up to speed with access for the business community. In several inter-governmental organisations, including the Commonwealth, the private sector is afforded enhanced interaction with Heads of State. The Commonwealth Business Council reports directly to CHOGM executive sessions in the same way that the Commonwealth Foundation (an inter-governmental agency) reports on its bi-CHOGM NGO Forums. Similarly whilst there has been much excitement about the new arrangements for civil society participation in the 2002 CFMM, these arrangements, spearheaded by the UK Treasury, have only brought civil society a level of interaction comparable with that already awarded the business world.

Any reform of Commonwealth accreditation needs to be seen as part of a wider package that addresses civil society participation in all Commonwealth fora. For example, civil society access to the Commonwealth Peoples' Centre, is dictated by the government hosting that CHOGM. Advice provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat on arrangements for the Centre, who should be allowed to participate and how the Centre should link in with the wider CHOGM, is minimal. A manual known as "The Blue Book" is prepared by the Commonwealth Secretariat for governments hosting CHOGMs. Out of one hundred pages only two are devoted to civil society, neither of which mentions the Centre. Host governments have an understandable desire to manage arrangements for CHOGMs and their satellite events. However minimum acceptable levels for the open and transparent participation of civil society in Commonwealth Peoples' Centres, and other CHOGM-related events, should be elaborated upon so that both civil society and governments are aware of what is expected. "The Blue Book" should make the link between CHOGM preparations, Commonwealth Peoples' Centres, accreditation and the practical manifestation of the Commonwealth's fundamental principles.

◆ Access to Information

Access to information was also seen by many respondents as a necessary accreditation entitlement. As one participant at the recent CFMM global civil society consultation concluded, without access to information, participation can only be participation for validation and not partnership. The joint Commonwealth Secretariat/Foundation review of official/unofficial relations is believed to have described reaching out to the official Commonwealth as like trying to enter a walled city with hidden gates. Too much

information is unnecessarily deemed confidential and hidden from public access. Accredited organisations need up-to-date, convenient and inexpensive access to the right kind of timely information. Papers from Commonwealth Ministerial and Heads of Government meetings (agendas and minutes, schedules of meetings, position papers, formal reports) should be available to the unofficial Commonwealth, at least to all accredited organisations, either via a secure section of the Commonwealth Secretariat's website or in hard copy format. Useful additional literature for newly accredited organisations could include information sheets on the Commonwealth and its principles (to be handed out to new staff of accredited organisations as part of their induction) and a pamphlet on the Commonwealth's official/unofficial infrastructure and ways to interact with it.

An important development in encouraging information flows between the official and unofficial Commonwealth could be the revival of a long standing but underused committee renamed in the HLRG report as the Co-ordination Committee for Commonwealth Agencies (CCCA).⁴⁶ The HLRG recommended that the membership of the Committee (which comprises representatives of the three inter-governmental Commonwealth agencies and the Chairs of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Board of Governors and Executive Committee) be expanded to enable "other pan-Commonwealth bodies as well as NGOs to participate in its meetings."⁴⁷ The Committee is principally a note-swapping forum for members to share information about present and planned activities. As such civil society representation on the Committee could provide an important conduit for information between the official and unofficial Commonwealth. For this to be effective it will be important for the civil society members of the Committee to filter information back to their constituencies at a national, regional and pan-Commonwealth level.

The Commonwealth Secretariat's website is not a useful tool for those trying to engage on a practical level with the Commonwealth.⁴⁸ There is too much generic information about the Commonwealth and limited up-to-date information about many of the Secretariat's divisions or their current work. There is no up-to-date list of official Commonwealth meetings – when the site was checked in July 2002 by the CPSU, the list was a year out of date. Links to unofficial Commonwealth organisations are incomplete. These deficiencies are detrimental not just for co-ordination with the unofficial Commonwealth but for governmental engagement with the Commonwealth as well.

⁴⁶ The Committee had been set-up in 1993 as the Commonwealth Agencies Consultative Committee (CACC) and re-named as the Apia Committee in 2000. The first meeting of the CCCA was 28 June 2002.

⁴⁷ Report by the Commonwealth High Level Review Group to Commonwealth Heads of Government (Coolum, 2002) V 45.10, p. 14

⁴⁸ The website of the Commonwealth Secretariat, found at <http://www.thecommonwealth.org>, is currently being overhauled. Whilst the layout of the site has improved, there seems little evidence to date that the site will contain the type of information recommended in this report.

Change in Process

The CPSU questionnaire also asked respondents who should be involved in deciding whether an organisation met accreditation criteria. Results were clearly in favour of the Commonwealth Secretariat (25 votes), alongside NGOs (17 votes) and the Commonwealth Foundation (18 votes). Many respondents talked about a cross-sector grouping, a joint committee or some form of representative structure. Governmental involvement received just eight votes. Reasons given for this included that governments should be able to comment on but not veto applications and that they were already represented by the Commonwealth Secretariat. Other suggestions of who should be involved in accrediting were the Commonwealth of Learning as a Commonwealth inter-governmental agency with the same standing as the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Foundation, as well as independent persons of standing providing that an objective and well-broadcast selection process was put in place. When asked outright whether NGOs should be involved in deciding changes to the existing arrangements for accreditation 22/30 (73%) said yes, only 3 said no and 5 were of no opinion. This clearly contrasts with the wishes of the HLRG who asked the Secretary General to consult with member governments to propose new accreditation criteria with no mention of the need to consult with civil society or even accredited NGOs.

With this in mind, some organisations had a clear understanding of the potential pitfalls of badly managed accreditation, stating that the process should be accountable and transparent so as not to be based on subjective views of the organisation's area of interest and commenting that discussions were not always based on the right reasons, so that politics, fluctuations in contact people and current interests often carried too much weight. Other respondents had a more parochial view of accreditation and were not concerned about its process or criteria ("we have no views on accreditation") or did not envisage situations where accreditation could be contentious. For example, one respondent believed that once criteria were established only the Commonwealth Secretariat should administer them, another thought that criteria should be different depending on an organisation's area of activity, and a third responded that "when our organisation wished to become recognised as a Commonwealth professional body we called upon the Secretary-General and he welcomed us as a member of the Commonwealth family. What further accreditation is required?" This last comment suggests that some accredited NGOs have a limited knowledge of the accreditation process, which parts of the Commonwealth Secretariat are currently involved in deciding accredited status, and the way such decisions are arrived at.

If the Commonwealth is to get serious about accreditation, and especially if it is to open its doors to civil society organisations at a national or regional level, it must establish a committee responsible for managing the accreditation process. It is no longer acceptable, or in keeping with the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth, to make decisions about civil society accreditation behind closed doors. It also makes no practical sense to divorce the Commonwealth Foundation from this process. A committee should be established with representation from the inter-governmental Commonwealth and civil society.

This committee could monitor observance to accreditation criteria and decide on requests for accredited status - both accreditation to the Commonwealth and ad hoc accreditation to meetings as suggested above. All decisions not to grant accredited status must be spelt out in an open and public document. At present accreditation is granted “for life”. There is no monitoring of organisations’ adherence to accreditation criteria or suspension of accredited status if organisations are not seen to be living up to these standards. If accreditation criteria are expanded there will be a greater need to monitor commitments to them. For example how are organisations promoting the Commonwealth and the Harare Principles? Are they engaging with the official/unofficial Commonwealth and making linkages with civil society groups at a national or regional level? Are they transparent and accountable in their financial dealings? The UN system requires NGOs in General and Special consultative status with ECOSOC to provide, to the Committee on Non-Governmental Organisations every fourth year a report on their activities and contributions to the work of the UN. The Commonwealth could adopt the same system – so that a quarter of accredited organisations are assessed every year – to be managed by the cross-sector accreditation committee.

Some respondents to the CPSU questionnaire made it clear that accreditation is not a sign of legitimacy, which they believed is given by an organisation’s ability to sustain itself, the visible work that it does, its track record and general reputation. The unofficial Commonwealth is not responsible to the official Commonwealth but to the peoples of the Commonwealth. For this reason it is important that civil society representatives are included on any accreditation committee as a form of peer review. Commonwealth civil society should also follow current efforts at self-regulation within the Indian voluntary sector under the coalition of “The Credibility Alliance” by self-defining what they expect of themselves and each other as accredited organisations, instead of waiting for member governments to announce their decisions at the Board of Governors meeting in December 2002.

Recommendations

To the Official Commonwealth:

1. Current accreditation criteria should be made more appropriate to the status accreditation affords. Useful criteria would include a commitment to engaging with the Commonwealth and its fundamental principles, accountable and transparent governance and not duplicating the work of other accredited organisations.
2. Accreditation criteria must be updated to allow for the official recognition of civil society at the national and regional level. Ad hoc accreditation to specific events would allow for engagement with organisations with a specific rather than a general interest in the Commonwealth.
3. Accreditation to CHOGMs should be expanded to accreditation to the Commonwealth and include civil society engagement at CHOGMs, ministerial meetings and through the inter-governmental agencies.
4. Civil society participation in ministerial meetings should conform to a minimum acceptable baseline. Innovative strategies should be imported into CHOGMs and other ministerial meetings.
5. Civil society participation in official Commonwealth events should be brought up to speed with that of the business community.
6. An open session for Heads of State, representatives of civil society and the business community should be worked into the first session of CHOGMs and every ministerial meeting. Papers from ministerial meetings and CHOGMs should be made available, at a minimum, to accredited NGOs.
7. "The Blue Book" should be updated to include minimum acceptable levels of civil society participation at CHOGMs and satellite events such as Commonwealth Peoples' Centres, and to advise about procedural ways of managing this engagement that are in keeping with the Commonwealth's fundamental principles.
8. The Commonwealth Foundation should utilise some of its funds to provide professional development training sessions for civil society representatives on issues such as fundraising.

9. The Commonwealth Secretariat website urgently needs revising to make it a useful tool for agencies (governmental and non-governmental) that wish to engage on a practical level with the organisation.
10. A cross-sectoral committee should be established to assess new applications for accredited status and to monitor the adherence of accredited NGOs to criteria. Such a committee must include civil society representation.
11. The Secretary-General needs to consult Commonwealth civil society prior to making any recommendations for changes in accreditation to the Board of Governors in December 2002.

To the Peoples' Commonwealth:

1. Accreditation for pan-Commonwealth NGOs should require organisations to demonstrate an engagement with other civil society groups at a national, regional and pan-Commonwealth level.
2. Civil society organisations should participate as fully as possible in the expanded CCCA. Civil society representatives on the CCCA should liaise with their constituencies before and after every meeting.
3. Commonwealth civil society (particularly accredited NGOs) should organise themselves to present their ideas about accreditation to the Secretary General and the Board of Governors before its meeting in December 2002.

ANNEX ONE:
Pan-Commonwealth NGOs Accredited to CHOGM 2002
with Abbreviations and Founding Dates

| Organisation | Abbreviation | Date Founded |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|
| Association of Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections | ACAIS | 2001 |
| Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Record Managers | ACARM | 1984 |
| Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies | ACLALS | 1965 |
| Association of Commonwealth Universities | ACU | 1913 |
| British Commonwealth Ex-Services League | BCEL | 1921 |
| Commonwealth Association of Architects | CAA | 1965 |
| Commonwealth Association for Corporate Governance | CACG | 1998 |
| Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples | CAIP | 1999 |
| Commonwealth Association for Local Action and Economic Development | COMMACT | 1988 |
| Commonwealth Association for Mental Handicap and Development Disabilities | CAMHADD | 1983 |
| Commonwealth Association of Museums | CAM | 1974 |
| Commonwealth Association of Paediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition | CAPGAN | 1994 |
| Commonwealth Association of Planners | CAP | 1971 |
| Commonwealth Association of Professional Centres | CAPC | 1996 |
| Commonwealth Association for Public Administration | CAPAM | 1994 |

| | | |
|---|--------|------|
| and Management | | |
| Commonwealth Association of Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators | CASTME | 1974 |
| Commonwealth Association of Scientific Agricultural Societies | CASAS | |
| Commonwealth Association of Surveying and Land Economy | CASLE | 1969 |
| Commonwealth Broadcasting Association | CBA | 1945 |
| Commonwealth Business Council | CBC | 1997 |
| Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management | CCEAM | 1970 |
| Commonwealth Countries' League | CCL | 1925 |
| Commonwealth Dental Association | CDA | 1991 |
| Commonwealth Engineers Council | CEC | 1946 |
| Commonwealth Forestry Association | CFA | 1921 |
| Commonwealth Forum for Project Management | CFPM | 1997 |
| Commonwealth Games Federation | CGF | 1930 |
| Commonwealth Geographical Bureau | CGB | 1968 |
| Commonwealth Group of Family Planning Associations | | |
| Commonwealth Historians Society | | 1989 |
| Commonwealth Human Ecology Council | CHEC | 1951 |
| Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative | CHRI | 1987 |
| Commonwealth Institute | CI | 1958 |
| Commonwealth Jewish Council | CJC | 1982 |
| Commonwealth Journalists Association | CJA | 1978 |
| Commonwealth Judicial | CJEI | |

| | | |
|--|---------------|------|
| Education Institute | | |
| Commonwealth Lawyers Association | CLA | 1983 |
| Commonwealth Legal Advisory Service | CLAS | 1962 |
| Commonwealth Legal Education Association | CLEA | 1971 |
| Commonwealth Library Association | COMLA | 1972 |
| Commonwealth Linking Trust | CLT | 1974 |
| Commonwealth Magistrates' and Judges' Association | CMJA | 1970 |
| Commonwealth Medical Association | CMA | 1962 |
| Commonwealth Medical Association Trust | COMMAT | 1985 |
| Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development | COMNET-IT | 1992 |
| Commonwealth Nurses Federation | CNF | 1973 |
| Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work | COSW | 1994 |
| Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association | CPA | 1970 |
| Commonwealth Press Union | CPU | 1909 |
| Commonwealth Relations Trust | | 1937 |
| Commonwealth Society for the Deaf | Sound Seekers | 1959 |
| Commonwealth Trade Union Council | CTUC | 1979 |
| Commonwealth Women's Network | CWN | 1991 |
| Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council | CYEC | 1970 |
| Commonwealth Veterinary Association | CVA | 1967 |
| Conference of Commonwealth Auditors General | | |
| Conference of | | 1971 |

| | | |
|--|--------------|------|
| Commonwealth Postal Administrations | | |
| Conference of Commonwealth Meteorologists | | 1929 |
| Council for Education in the Commonwealth | CEC | 1959 |
| Disabled Peoples International | DPI | 1992 |
| English Speaking Union of the Commonwealth | ESU | 1918 |
| League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers | LECT | 1901 |
| Organisation of Commonwealth United Nations Associations | OCUNA | 1987 |
| Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth | RASC | 1957 |
| Royal Commonwealth Society | RCS | 1868 |
| Royal Over-Seas League | RoL | 1910 |
| Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind | Sight Savers | 1950 |
| Soroptimist International Commonwealth Group | | 1998 |
| Victoria League for Commonwealth Friendship | | 1901 |

ANNEX TWO:

Pan-Commonwealth And Other Commonwealth Related Civil Society Organisations Listed By Activity

Pan-Commonwealth NGOs with accredited status are numbered in bold type whilst other Commonwealth related civil society organisations are bullet pointed in plain type.

Health

- 1. Commonwealth Association for Mental Handicap and Development Disabilities**
- 2. Commonwealth Association of Paediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition**
- 3. Commonwealth Dental Association**
- 4. Commonwealth Group of Family Planning Associations**
- 5. Commonwealth Medical Association**
- 6. Commonwealth Medical Association Trust**
- 7. Commonwealth Nurses Federation**
- 8. Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work**
- 9. Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association**
- 10. Sight Savers**
- 11. Sound Seekers**
 - Para55.org

Education

- 12. Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies**
- 13. Association of Commonwealth Universities**
- 14. Commonwealth Association of Museums**
- 15. Commonwealth Association of Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators**
- 16. Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management**
- 17. Commonwealth Countries' League**
- 18. Commonwealth Library Association**
- 19. Commonwealth Linking Trust**
- 20. Council for Education in the Commonwealth**
- 21. League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers**
 - British Empire and Commonwealth Museum
 - Commonwealth Association for the Education and Training of Adults
 - Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa
 - Commonwealth Consortium on Education
 - Institute of Commonwealth Studies
 - The Round Table : Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs

Human Rights And Development

- 22. Association of Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections**
- 23. Commonwealth Association for Local Action and Economic Development**
- 24. Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples**
- 25. Commonwealth Association of Professional Centres**

- 26. Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative**
- 27. Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development**
- 28. Commonwealth Trade Union Council**
- 29. Commonwealth Women's Network**
- 30. Disabled Peoples International**
- 31. Organisation of Commonwealth United Nations Associations**
- 32. Soroptimist International**

Good Governance

- 33. Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Record Managers**
- 34. Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management**
- 35. Commonwealth Forum for Project Management**
- 36. Conference of Commonwealth Auditors General**
- 37. Conference of Commonwealth Postal Administrations**
 - Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance
 - Commonwealth Hansard Editors Association
 - Commonwealth Local Government Forum
 - Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
 - Conference of Commonwealth Speakers and Presiding Officers
 - Latimer House Group

Private Sector

- 38. Commonwealth Association for Corporate Governance**
- 39. Commonwealth Business Council**
 - Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation

Religion

- 40. Commonwealth Jewish Council**

Press

- 41. Commonwealth Broadcasting Association**
- 42. Commonwealth Journalists Association**
- 43. Commonwealth Press Union**

Youth

- 44. Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council**

Law

- 45. Commonwealth Judicial Education Institute**
- 46. Commonwealth Lawyers Association**
- 47. Commonwealth Legal Advisory Service**
- 48. Commonwealth Legal Education Association**
- 49. Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association**
 - Commonwealth Association of Public Sector Lawyers

Commonwealth Friendship/Promotion/Service

- 50. British Commonwealth Ex-Services League**
- 51. Commonwealth Games Federation**
- 52. Commonwealth Historians Society**
- 53. Commonwealth Institute**
- 54. Commonwealth Relations Trust**
- 55. English Speaking Union of the Commonwealth**
- 56. Royal Commonwealth Society**
- 57. Royal Over-Seas League**
- 58. Victoria League for Commonwealth Friendship**
 - Commonwealth Association of Geneva
 - Commonwealth Chess Association
 - Commonwealth War Graves Commission
 - Joint Commonwealth Societies' Council
 - Women Speakers for the Commonwealth

Environment

- 59. Commonwealth Association of Scientific Agricultural Societies**
- 60. Commonwealth Forestry Association**
- 61. Commonwealth Geographical Bureau**
- 62. Commonwealth Veterinary Association**
- 63. Conference of Commonwealth Meteorologists**
- 64. Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth**
 - Standing Committee on Commonwealth Forestry

Built Environment

- 65. Commonwealth Association of Architects**
- 66. Commonwealth Association of Planners**
- 67. Commonwealth Association of Surveying and Land Economy**
- 68. Commonwealth Engineers Council**
- 69. Commonwealth Human Ecology Council**
 - Built Environment Professionals in the Commonwealth

Price: £10.00

Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit