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# BRIEFING PAPER FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ADVOCATES:

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## THE COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS AND THE COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETINGS

In October 2011, the Australian government will host the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Perth, Australia. The meeting will bring together Heads of Government, Ministers and high-level officials from 53 Commonwealth member states for three days of discussion on a range of topics relevant to the Commonwealth, its nations and its peoples.

A meeting of one quarter of the world's heads of government, covered by 1000 media personnel, clearly represents a valuable opportunity for civil society advocates to influence Commonwealth policy and to raise the profile of their campaigns and priorities.

The Commonwealth is an organisation like few others in the international political system, with an idiosyncratic profile of strengths, limitations and operations.

While the 'unofficial Commonwealth' of civil society organisations is regarded as being among the most visible and efficient elements of the association,<sup>2</sup> civil society organisations have at times been criticised for the manner in which they have sought to engage with the official Commonwealth in the past. Such criticisms include:

- Civil society representatives being uninformed about the Commonwealth's potential;
- Civil society organisations failing to identify points for specific collaborative action using Commonwealth programs and institutions; and
- Advocates seeking to influence Commonwealth governments without being particularly committed to promoting Commonwealth collective endeavours.<sup>3</sup>

This briefing paper is designed to equip civil society advocates with the information they will need to build the foundations of an effective Commonwealth advocacy campaign ahead of the forthcoming CHOGM. It explores the workings of the 'official Commonwealth' (comprised of intergovernmental meetings and the various Commonwealth agencies), the 'unofficial Commonwealth (comprised of civil society) and their interactions. It is also a roadmap for locating additional information about Commonwealth programs and institutions that may be relevant to particular strategies, themes and campaigns.

## 1. THE COMMONWEALTH – AN INTRODUCTION

### **1.1 Pre-1949 era: The 'British' Commonwealth**

The British Commonwealth, as it was originally known, was a voluntary association of Great Britain and her Dominions, united on the basis of their historical and cultural links to the British Empire. The political purpose of the association during this era was the preservation and advancement of British interests, while ostensibly attempting to reconcile these with those of the Dominions.<sup>4</sup>

India's transition to the status of a sovereign independent republic in 1947 and her desire to remain a member of the Commonwealth posed a categorical challenge for the association. There was a strong feeling among most member states that a way should be found to keep India within the Commonwealth, but it was clear that the fundamental character of the association would have to evolve if this were to occur.

In April 1949, Commonwealth Ministers met in London to consider the implications of India's continued membership as a republic and to conceive a solution to the challenges posed by India's independence.<sup>5</sup>

### **1.2 Post-1949 era: The modern 'Commonwealth of Nations'**

After six days of deliberations, the Ministers of the Commonwealth produced the *London Declaration of 1949*, a farsighted political instrument that jettisoned allegiance to the Crown as an essential requirement of Commonwealth membership for India in exchange for her acceptance of the British sovereign as the symbol of the free association of member nations. In practice, this became a precedent for the later inclusion of 33 republics, and endowed the Commonwealth with a capacity for growth and adaptation that bestowed upon it the distinction of being the only major international political organisation to have survived WWII.<sup>6</sup> It is now the world's oldest surviving association of sovereign states.<sup>7</sup>

In formulating the *London Declaration*, the Commonwealth Ministers opted for solidarity among member states over the uniformity of their internal constitutional arrangements. This spirit of solidarity and informality continues to characterise the Commonwealth's style of operation and Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings up to the present day.

Since the *London Declaration*, the changing composition of the Commonwealth has naturally shifted the focus of the association. Broadly speaking, its key objective has moved over the last six decades from the preservation and advancement of British interests to the promotion of the interests of the majority of its new members and 'the articulation of their mostly anti-Western demands for international reform'.<sup>8</sup> The organisation's specific priorities are explored in more detail in the following sections.

## 2. THE MODERN COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS

Today, the Commonwealth of Nations is a multinational, multi-cultural and multi-religious network that is exceptionally diverse politically, economically and socially. The Commonwealth is comprised of the world's largest and smallest, richest and poorest countries and people of all faiths and ethnicities. Member countries span six continents and oceans from Africa (19) to Asia (8), the Americas (2), the Caribbean (12), Europe (3) and the South Pacific (10).<sup>9</sup>

If civil society advocates engage with it effectively, the Commonwealth can provide a platform to deliver their messages to a vast audience of decision-makers and societies.

A solid understanding of the modern organisation's idiosyncratic features, its strengths and its limitations is essential to the effectiveness of any Commonwealth advocacy strategy. An overview of these aspects of the organisation is set out below.

### 2.1 Principles and objectives

Unlike organisations such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth was not established through a treaty.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, two key documents that clarify its values, objectives and functions: the *Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles of 1971* and the *Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991*. Together, these declarations are considered to be the two most important elements of the Commonwealth's uncodified constitution. The key elements of each are set out below.

- The ***Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles of 1971*** sets out the core political values and principles of the association which members must pursue through cooperation, including international peace and order, individual liberty, human rights, the elimination of racial discrimination, self-determination, free trade, the reduction of economic inequality between members and development and the rejection of 'coercion' as an instrument of policy. It further establishes that the association is based on consultation, discussion and cooperation.<sup>11</sup>
- In the ***Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991***, Commonwealth nations reaffirmed their commitment to the principles set out in the Singapore Declaration (with the exception of the rejection of coercion as an instrument of policy). Of particular relevance to the work of development advocates, the declaration also established as priorities for the Commonwealth the provision of universal access to education, the promotion of sustainable development, free trade, the alleviation of the debt burdens of the poorest developing countries, the development of human capital, increasing programs designed to raise living standards, the protection of the environment and effective responses to communicable diseases.<sup>12</sup>

These core beliefs were subsequently consolidated into the one instrument upon the adoption of the *Trinidad and Tobago Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles* in 2009.<sup>13</sup>

**These instruments make the Commonwealth an appropriate target for development-focused advocacy strategies.**

## ***2.2 Organisational form***

The Commonwealth of Nations does not have a stand-alone organisational structure like the United Nations. Compared to the United Nations it is a relatively informal and loosely structured international organisation.<sup>14</sup> The Commonwealth is, for the most part, a diffuse association of governmental, private and civil society actors.<sup>15</sup>

However, some important aspects of its work are carried out through a number of centralised organs, agencies and offices, the most relevant of which are:

- The Commonwealth Secretariat;
- The Secretary-General; and
- The Commonwealth Foundation.

An overview of each is set out below.

## ***2.3 Commonwealth Secretariat***

In 1965, the heads of government initiated major structural reform of the Commonwealth by establishing an independent, London-based Commonwealth Secretariat headed by the Commonwealth Secretary-General. This organ replaced the British Commonwealth Relations Office as the joint organiser of CHOGMs, gives advice and technical assistance to member states and develops the programs necessary to execute CHOGM decisions (when requested to do so).<sup>16</sup>

By comparison with the United Nations Secretariat, the Commonwealth Secretariat has a limited executive prerogative<sup>17</sup> and does not have the resources to execute major programs on behalf of member states.<sup>18</sup> Its entire budget – for all its activities and operations – is less than one percent of the budget of the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development.<sup>19</sup> As such, its budget for poverty alleviation is very small.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it is not an ideal target for any advocacy strategy designed to procure financial contributions for aid or development.<sup>21</sup>

## ***2.4 Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC)***

The Commonwealth’s development-related activities are principally led by the Secretariat and the attached Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC). The CFTC was launched by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1971 as a mutual fund and provides technical assistance to support economic growth, poverty reduction and sustainable development. The CFTC has an annual budget of around £29 million. It endeavours to be a flexible, cost-effective unit providing Commonwealth members with specialised help to acquire the knowledge and institutional capacity to address their own development priorities.<sup>22</sup>

## **2.5 The Commonwealth Secretary-General**

The Secretary-General of the Commonwealth heads the Commonwealth Secretariat and has a variety of powers and responsibilities which may be of relevance to the objectives of civil society advocates.

For example, ahead of each CHOGM, the Secretary-General will consult with member states to gauge discussion priorities.<sup>23</sup> As the organisation of each CHOGM is shared between the host government and the Secretariat, the Secretary-General plays an important role in determining CHOGM agendas.

As the head of the Commonwealth's peak organ, the Secretary-General is generally afforded both official and informal access to all Commonwealth Heads of Government,<sup>24</sup> and can therefore act as key advisor and normative compass among political leaders.

For these reasons, it is very important that advocacy strategies include elements designed to engage with the Secretary-General through the Secretariat.

**Advocates must keep in mind that the Secretary-General's priority is the Commonwealth's collective mission rather than special interests. As such, their strategies, campaigns and communications must be positioned – to the greatest extent possible – in relation to the Commonwealth's collective values and principles.**

## **2.5 The Commonwealth Foundation<sup>25</sup>**

The Commonwealth Foundation was established in 1965 to facilitate cooperation at the non-governmental level, and between civil society and governments.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of its current activities, the Foundation runs a significant number of initiatives each year designed to mobilise civil society in the pursuit of democracy, good governance, sustainable development and cultural diversity. To this end, it engages in research and publishing, organises training workshops and produces tools to equip civil society organisations throughout the Commonwealth to meet the challenges they face.

The activities it supports are set out in its Annual Workplan, available on the Commonwealth Foundation's website. Broadly, the Workplan includes activities in the areas of culture and creativity, economic development, gender, governance, health, human rights, human settlements, the natural environment and peace building.<sup>27</sup> While the Foundation operates on modest resources of only £4.2 million per year (09/10), grants are available to organisations from Commonwealth member countries for activities such as workshops, seminars, conferences, cultural festivals, exchanges and study visits.<sup>28</sup>

**Advocates should consider how existing Commonwealth programs and initiatives could be utilised to the maximum extent possible throughout their campaigns.**

Importantly, the Commonwealth Foundation also coordinates the biennial Commonwealth People's Forum held during each CHOGM. The importance of these forums and the Foundation's role in their coordination is considered in Section 2.6 below.

## **2.6 Strengths and limitations of the Commonwealth**

As mentioned above, it is vital that civil society strategies are conceived with the strengths and limitations of the Commonwealth in mind. The key aspects relevant to the work of development-focused civil society advocates are outlined below:

### **Strengths**

- **A facilitator of globalisation:** the Commonwealth may be viewed as a facilitator of globalisation because of the way in which it 'dissolves distinctions between global and local and is producing a kind of global civil society composed of interlocking networks of NGOs, professional associations and other groups, all interacting with governments and IGOs'.<sup>29</sup> As such, there is much emphasis within the official Commonwealth on sharing – perspectives, policy, technical capacity and information which is of practical value to member states – and advocates should consider framing at least some of their objectives around this capacity.
- **A voice for the developing world:** One-third of the estimated 1.2 billion people in the world living on less than US\$1 a day are Commonwealth citizens and all but a handful of its 53 members are developing countries.<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, the concerns of developing countries are often high on Commonwealth agendas. Examples of the Commonwealth's work in this area include successfully promoting initiatives to encourage creditors to write-off the debts of heavily indebted countries, attending to the needs of small states, advocating for development of democracy and lobbying on behalf of African countries at G8 meetings.<sup>31</sup>
- **Cooperation on development:** Whatever the shortcomings of the Commonwealth may be in other fields, cooperation amongst member states in economic and social realms is undiminished. There is an established calendar of well-attended ministerial meetings for education, finance, health, labour, law and women's affairs, each presenting opportunities for civil society organisations to influence policies in these areas.<sup>32</sup>
- **Organisational simplicity:** In response to criticisms about the Commonwealth's operations, one commentator stated that 'the bureaucratic absurdities and inefficiencies of which it is sometime accused, pale into insignificance when compared with the Byzantine proliferation, inflation and rigidity which characterises the United Nations and its agencies'.<sup>33</sup> This organisational simplicity means that the barriers faced by civil society in influencing Commonwealth policy are relatively low, all else being equal.

### **Limitations of the Commonwealth**

- **Lacking clear purpose:** One criticism often levelled against the Commonwealth is that in the wake of decolonisation, the association has no clear strategic, regional or functional rationale and has been unable to articulate what it stands for in the place of British

interests.<sup>34</sup> In comparative terms, the Commonwealth's core competencies are indeed rather loosely defined. This stands in stark contrast to those of the United Nations Security Council (which has a mandate to provide international peace and security)<sup>35</sup> and the WTO (which has responsibility for administering a sub-set of rules of international relations relating to international trade).<sup>36</sup>

- **Uncertain comparative advantage:** While there is no shortage of issues that the Commonwealth could address, what is less clear is whether the Commonwealth has a comparative advantage in addressing them. As one commentator has noted: 'It may indeed be able to bring together a useful cross-section of relevant expertise and interests on all these issues, as it did during the 1970s during the debates over the feasibility of creating a New International Economic Order, but there must be some doubt as to whether this will be sufficient to engage the interest of heads of state and so create the mandate for the Commonwealth's functional work'.<sup>37</sup>
- **The primacy afforded to economics and trade:** Some commentators have criticised the Commonwealth for paying too much attention to politics, diplomacy, economics, trade and aid at the expense of dealing with the broader social issues facing Commonwealth peoples and dealing with human development challenges more directly.<sup>38</sup>
- **Limited financial resources:** The Commonwealth Secretariat is run on very slender financial resources,<sup>39</sup> amounting to under one cent per Commonwealth citizen. As such, the Commonwealth is not an ideal organisation to lobby for significant financial resources for development. For the same reason, civil society strategies should not invest resources in lobbying the Secretariat to execute major development initiatives.<sup>40</sup>
- **Regional and global security:** Throughout its life, the Commonwealth has been reluctant to concern itself with matters of regional and international security.<sup>41</sup> As the links between security and development are further understood, scepticism may rise regarding the Commonwealth's effectiveness as a forum for the discussion and advancement of development-related issues.

**While these observations should be taken into account in setting expectations for the upcoming CHOGM, it is not obvious that all of these limitations always work to the disadvantage of civil society advocates. Advocates should give consideration to how some of these characteristics can be leveraged towards the achievement of their objectives.**

### 3. COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETINGS

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs) bring together the leaders of the 54-member Commonwealth of Nations to discuss issues affecting Commonwealth members and international concerns. They attract the heads of government, ministers and officials from one quarter of the world's nations, representing more than two billion people and around one thousand media personnel.<sup>42</sup>

The organisation of these meetings is essentially a partnership between the Secretariat and the relevant host country.<sup>43</sup> As such, both should be targeted as a part of any advocacy campaign designed to influence the official agenda for the forthcoming meeting. CHOGMs are organisationally complex, and some aspects of their planning may begin as early as two years before the event.<sup>44</sup> As such, early engagement of the Secretariat and the Australian federal government is advised.

Each CHOGM comprises several elements.<sup>45</sup> Those relevant here include:

- The Heads of Government Meeting;
- The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG); and
- The People's Forum.

Any CHOGM may involve additional forums or symposia. Commonwealth Ministers may also meet on specialised issues such as education, health and economic development.<sup>46</sup>

#### **3.1 Heads of Government Meetings**

CHOGMs are the main decision-making apparatus for the Commonwealth and the decisions reached at these meetings define the direction and priorities of the association and the Secretariat's strategic plan for the following two to three years.<sup>47</sup> The official agenda for each meeting is developed through collaboration between the Secretariat and the relevant host country.

The emphasis in these meetings is on governing through consensus.<sup>48</sup> Discussions between leaders are conducted privately and informally, in order to stimulate frank and open discussion.<sup>49</sup> Set speeches and voting are avoided where possible, leaving the meetings largely free of the manipulation which characterises debates in other international forums.<sup>50</sup> As leaders' meetings are conducted in private and are subject to a media ban, the final communiqués issued at the conclusion of each CHOGM are the only record of discussions.

Some commentators have described these arrangements as producing a 'dangerous' media vacuum in which the official Commonwealth risks losing control over how its activities are reported.

**In developing their Commonwealth advocacy strategies, advocates should consider how to take full advantage of these arrangements to assist in the achievement of their objectives.**

### 3.2 CMAG

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) is comprised of nine rotating foreign ministers whose collective objective is to promote two of the Commonwealth's most important values: democracy and good governance.

It was conceived as a mechanism to monitor member states' compliance with values and principles (as set out in instruments such as the Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991), to report its findings and to seek support from successive CHOGMs in relation to non-compliance. CMAG has the power to suspend (and readmit) members who fail to uphold the Commonwealth's basic values.

By performing these functions, CMAG has played a significant role in assisting member states such as Gambia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone in their transition to democratically elected governments.<sup>51</sup>

### 3.3 Strengths and limitations of CHOGM

#### Strengths

- **A forum for building North-South consensus:** It has been said that the Commonwealth cannot negotiate for the world, but that it can help the world negotiate.<sup>52</sup> One way in which it has demonstrated its capacity to do so has been by bridging 'North-South' divides at its CHOGMs – even on controversial topics such as human rights.<sup>53</sup>

Importantly, positions reached in the Commonwealth can also be carried forward into other more influential forums, such as the United Nations and the WTO, and thereby be used to progress negotiations conducted outside the Commonwealth.<sup>54</sup> For example, Commonwealth finance ministers often use the occasion of CHOGM to informally make an early start on their annual IMF and World Bank meetings.<sup>55</sup> This could be particularly valuable, for example, in relation to civil society campaigns pushing for the introduction of taxes on financial transactions for development (see Section 4.3 below).

- **Resolution of tensions and disputes between states:** CHOGM is additionally a forum for traditional diplomacy. The Secretary-General's access to Commonwealth leaders and observer status at the UN gives him or her the potential to act as a mediator of international relations.<sup>56</sup>

'Good offices' refers to the discrete personal diplomacy undertaken by the top official of an intergovernmental organisation,<sup>57</sup> and the good offices of the Commonwealth's Secretary General have also been used many times as an informal method of resolving differences of opinion, tensions and disputes between states.<sup>58</sup>

- **A forum for the interests of small states:** The Commonwealth is one of the few international forums where small and middle power states outnumber developing countries by a significant margin and can exert a significant influence on political deliberations and Commonwealth policy.<sup>59</sup> As a result, CHOGMs are regularly used to raise the profile of issues of particular concern to small states such as the effects of climate change on low-lying island nations.<sup>60</sup> For this reason, CHOGM has developed a reputation as the world's premier small

states forum,<sup>61</sup> and therefore would be an excellent target for advocacy campaigns driven by issues of particular concern to small states.

- **A forum for applying peer pressure to undemocratic states:** Democracy and good governance are core values of the Commonwealth, and the association has, within the limits of its power, striven to enforce their fulfilment. One commentator has stated that ‘no other inter-governmental grouping is now so rigorous in setting standards of governance which member states are expected to meet.’<sup>62</sup> For example, at the 2007 CHOGM held in Kampala, CMAG suspended Pakistan for repeatedly failing to meet the conditions of civil rule<sup>63</sup> and also contributed to the isolation of the military regime that overthrew Sierra Leone’s democratically-elected president.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps most significantly, it is regarded as having played a leading role as an international pressure group for action against apartheid, forcing South Africa from its membership.<sup>65</sup>
- **Strong support and loyalty among states:** Despite the criticisms about the Commonwealth’s abilities and potential as an agent of change, few doubt the depth of support and loyalty shown towards it by member states.<sup>66</sup> Judging by the well-attended CHOGMs, political leaders value the contacts, connections and opportunities for dialogue facilitated by the meetings.<sup>67</sup> As such, civil society advocates can expect almost all 53 heads of government to attend the forthcoming meeting.
- **Inclusion of civil society:** The work of NGOs is central to the Commonwealth’s mission. The Commonwealth People’s Forum organised by the Commonwealth Foundation in parallel with CHOGMs has been described as the ‘antithesis of G7 exclusivity’.<sup>68</sup>

### Limitations

- **Lack of civil society access to Commonwealth leaders at official summits:** A constant complaint from civil society representatives is the limited access that advocates have to Commonwealth leaders and their staff at CHOGMs, access which has been compared unfavourably to what is offered to accredited NGOs at the United Nations.<sup>69</sup> In general, CHOGMs themselves do not generally present opportunities for civil society actors to directly lobby heads of government, although pressure can be applied indirectly via the Civil Society Statement (produced at the conclusion of the People’s Forum) and through the media.

**In view of these difficulties, advocacy campaigns must be initiated on a bilateral basis well before CHOGM itself, meaning that advocacy must be conducted with a large number of stakeholders over a vast geographical area. As such, cooperation and coordination among civil society actors and coordination is vital and, accordingly, should be specifically built into advocacy strategies.**

- **A forum for quiet diplomacy:** Save in extreme circumstances, CHOGMs are not often used to confronting or openly criticising individual states on matters of domestic or foreign policy.<sup>70</sup> Quiet diplomacy – conducted out of public view – is the norm,<sup>71</sup> and consensus-oriented and friendly interaction between member states is very highly valued.<sup>72</sup> As such,

civil society strategies seeking to generate official criticism or the suspension or expulsion of individual members over matters such as human rights violations are likely to face obstacles. Such strategies are likely to be more successful if their objective is to put pressure on individual governments through the media.

- **Media-focused:** Some commentators have lamented the extent to which some recent CHOGMs have risked becoming a 'media circus, with set-piece speeches, photo-calls carefully timed to allow homeward transmission by satellite, and the press themselves sniffing around for a story which will command public attention over what is, by international standards, an extended period'.<sup>73</sup> To the extent that this is true, however, it merely underlines the potential of civil society to shape media coverage in the lead up to, during and after the meeting.

### **3.4 Practical and operational considerations<sup>74</sup>**

#### **Engaging home governments**

Advocates seeking to influence CHOGM discussions and outcomes should:

1. Engage with the Commonwealth desk within their relevant foreign ministry early in their campaigns. Letters, petitions and submission papers should be sent to the relevant Commonwealth desk with a request that they also be provided to the government delegation that will be attending CHOGM;
2. Develop submissions which are, to the maximum extent possible, solutions-focused and which set out recommendations for addressing the issues raised;
3. Request meetings with their foreign minister and/or relevant delegate on Commonwealth affairs; and
4. Engage with the political affairs division of the Australian High Commission in their home countries in order to influence the Australian government during the planning phase of CHOGM.

#### **Accreditation**

While accreditation is not essential to executing effective Commonwealth advocacy campaigns, it does confer benefits that may be particularly valuable to some advocates. Civil society organisations seeking accreditation to CHOGM should first request accreditation to the Commonwealth through the Secretariat ahead of the next deadline for submissions (March 2011). Once this has been obtained, they should then seek accreditation to CHOGM. Detailed instructions on accreditation can be obtained from the Secretariat's Commonwealth Liaison Officer or through the following link:

[http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/174739/142018/civil\\_society](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/174739/142018/civil_society)

Accreditation to the Commonwealth enables civil society organisations to:

- Have visitor's access to Commonwealth's Headquarters at Marlborough House, London, which provides an opportunity for informal discussions with Secretariat and Commonwealth Foundation personnel;
- Obtain access to information which may not be publicly available;
- Participate in consultative forums (e.g. focus group meetings and special consultations on specialised issues); and
- Obtain accreditation to CHOGM. The benefits which this confers varies from meeting to meeting but may include: putting forward submissions to governments at the meeting; having access to reports approved by Heads of Government; being invited to CHOGMs' opening ceremony and social events; and being given opportunities to interact with the Committee of the Whole which drafts the CHOGM communiqué.

#### 4. THE COMMONWEALTH AND CIVIL SOCIETY

*They multiply our message. They cajole us; they hold us accountable.  
Meanwhile they champion their own different themes and professions.*

**Former Commonwealth Secretary-General,  
Don McKinnon on the role of CSOs<sup>75</sup>**

There is little doubt that civil society organisations (CSOs) have an important role to play in the fulfilment of the Commonwealth's official objectives. Less obvious, however, are the ways in which the biannual Commonwealth Heads of Government may help CSOs achieve their objectives. This section briefly covers the place of CSOs in the Commonwealth, before examining the potential for CSOs to use the forthcoming CHOGM to advance development-related agendas.

##### **4.1 The Commonwealth and Civil Society**

The Commonwealth regards itself as a 'champion' of civil society. One reason for this was the 'farsighted and somewhat remarkable decision' in 1965 to establish the Commonwealth Foundation to facilitate cooperation at the non-government level.<sup>76</sup>

A second factor is the Commonwealth's commitment to democracy and wide participation in governance through: the dispersion of power in society, encouragement of countervailing centres of influence; active engagement by citizens in the management of public affairs, including their assumption of responsibility for local developments; and the ability of the general public to express their collective voices on the issues of the day.<sup>77</sup>

However, in some Commonwealth countries, particularly those where national statehood is a comparatively recent phenomenon, there is ongoing ambivalence towards civil society organisations.<sup>78</sup> To some Commonwealth member states these organisations may appear to be 'Trojan horses' in terms of external influence, especially where they engage in advocacy designed to change public policy. Governments of some Commonwealth member states which have been voted into power through democratic elections and which are open to participation of the entire population can be irritated by the claims of NGOs, given what appear to be their narrow bases of support.<sup>79</sup>

While it is probably unrealistic to avoid such criticism altogether – particularly if civil society advocates raise contentious topics – advocates would do well to anticipate these concerns, by taking such steps as:

- Building into their messages information which demonstrates the breadth of their constituencies; and
- Integrating into their campaigns messages that demonstrate the relevance of their objectives to the official Commonwealth's collective mission.

#### **4.2 Civil society at CHOGMs**

It is the view of some commentators that Commonwealth CSOs make better use of CHOGMs as a platform for their agendas than do CMAG or Heads of Government, as appeared to be the case at the 2007 CHOGM in Kampala.<sup>80</sup> In that case, CSOs outshone the official Commonwealth in two key respects: their activities received accurate and comprehensive press coverage, and they addressed important issues that CMAG and HoGs did not, including the deterioration in Zimbabwe, climate change, ethnic minority rights and gender inequality.<sup>81</sup>

The major civil society event on the Commonwealth calendar, and the most significant consultative policy making event for Commonwealth civil society organisations, is the Commonwealth People's Forum.

Held in parallel with CHOGMs every two years, the People's Forum brings together hundreds of non-governmental groups from the association's 54 member countries to reach consensus and catalyse action on key issues facing Commonwealth societies. Civil society representatives generally discuss topics of particular relevance to development, such as climate change, culture, education, financial crisis, food security, gender, health and human rights. The last Commonwealth People's Forum in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009 consisted of eight assemblies on topics such as human rights, gender, democracy and HIV/AIDS.<sup>82</sup>

On the final day of the People's Forum, a joint statement embodying the collective voice of all civil society groups represented at the event is issued directly ahead of the relevant CHOGM. This gives non-governmental organisations a unique and high-profile platform from which to influence discussions at CHOGM and media coverage of the event.

#### **4.3 Types of CSOs that interact with the Commonwealth**

The activities of CSOs that interact with the official Commonwealth are drawn from the following areas:

- Built environment;
- Commonwealth friendship/promotion/service;
- Education;
- Environment;
- Good governance;
- Health;
- Human rights and development;
- Law;
- Media;
- Religion;
- Private sector; and
- Youth.<sup>83</sup>

In terms of the types of CSOs that are likely to be represented at the forthcoming CHOGM, these include:

- **National, regional and global ‘grassroots organisations’.** This group consists mainly of activists drawn from community associations and welfare bodies that campaign for public action on such issues as equality of women, the disabled, human rights and combating HIV/AIDS. As such organisations may only infrequently (if ever) interact with the official Commonwealth, and indeed some have been viewed unfavourably because of the ways in which they have sometimes interacted and engaged with the official Commonwealth. It is vital, therefore, that representatives from these organisations have a solid understanding of the Commonwealth, its potential and limitations, and how its infrastructure of agendas, programs and budgets actually operate.
- **Commonwealth voluntary and professional organisations and associations.** These embrace a wide variety of organisations. Many are membership associations in professional fields such as architecture, broadcasting, educational management, engineering, law, nursing, social work, surveying, etc., and have members all over the Commonwealth. Bodies belonging to this group generally have a dual agenda: first, promoting development and innovation in their field of interest, and second, supporting and advancing relevant Commonwealth collective activity. One example of the kind of activities undertaken by such organisations that may be relevant to grassroots organisations is the ‘Commonwealth Conversation’. This online initiative, launched by the Royal Commonwealth Society in 2009, encourages the publics of Commonwealth member states to share their perceptions of the Commonwealth and of the agendas it could usefully address.<sup>84</sup>

While the Commonwealth Foundation can foster cooperation between the two groups, organisations in these two constituencies should assist one another to ensure that civil society advocacy campaigns are as effective as possible.<sup>85</sup>

To that end, it is recommended that advocacy strategies that are to be executed by members of either of these groups include strategies to engage with relevant members of the other, given the complementary nature of their strengths and interests.

If there is an exclusive focus on the grassroots, then specialised knowledge of the Commonwealth may be deficient, resulting in the issuance of statements and recommendations that are worthy but too general to be ‘actionable’ by Commonwealth governments and institutions.<sup>86</sup>

On the other hand, domination by Commonwealth professional associations may produce outcomes which are less ‘in touch’ with younger generations and which may be unrepresentative of the Commonwealth’s diversity of cultures and peoples.<sup>87</sup>

In contrast to these outcomes, cooperation between these organisations has underpinned civil society successes such as:

- The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative;
- The CoNGOSAM group of 19 bodies which worked in the mid-1990s to link up with South Africa and Mozambique;
- The Latimer House group, whose agreed principles for the relationship between executive, parliament and the judiciary were endorsed at the 2003 CHOGM in Abuja; and
- The Para 55 group (named after the paragraph on HIV/AIDS in the Durban communiqué of 1999) which called on all Commonwealth organisations to cooperate to turn back the pandemic, using the personal examples of political leaders.<sup>88</sup>

In each case, Commonwealth organisations collaborated to achieve what would have been impossible for any of them to achieve independently.<sup>89</sup>

#### **4.4 Development-related advocacy strategies and CHOGM**

It is important that civil society advocates have realistic expectations regarding the potential benefits arising from the forthcoming CHOGM. Outlined below are a number of broad objectives that build on the Commonwealth's demonstrated strengths and that could be adapted to the specific development priorities of civil society advocates.

- **New political consensus:** It is unrealistic to expect that the Commonwealth Secretariat will be able to 'fix' major development challenges through new programs and initiatives. However, the establishment of a new political consensus on a development issue at CHOGM could be valuable to civil society, particularly if it relates to an area of international policy that has not yet received significant political attention. Such consensus could then be carried forward into other forums that do have the capacity to deliver development programs throughout the Commonwealth.
- **New research:** The Secretariat can sponsor high-quality research on issues that will help civil society influence Commonwealth policy, as it has done on numerous topics previously.<sup>90</sup> For example, in 1987 it was the first organisation in the world to commission research into the effects of climate change.
- **Increased profile for issues:** CHOGMs provide an excellent opportunity to raise the profile of civil society campaigns and issues because of the extent of the media coverage they achieve. This can take on even greater value in circumstances where civil society has been unable to influence CHOGMs' official agenda.
- **Improved dialogue:** The Commonwealth certainly has the potential to contribute – as it has done on many occasions in the past – to informed discussions about challenges, which may lead to their amelioration or better management.<sup>91</sup> This can be realised either through CHOGM itself or through publications, workshops and conferences coordinated or supported by the Secretariat. Civil society can facilitate the improvement of political dialogue by ensuring that the official Commonwealth is informed by a range of contemporary perspectives from the interrelated fields of development and security studies,

international relations, international organisation and political science and political economy.<sup>92</sup>

These broad objectives could be pursued in connection with various development issues. A sample of these might include:

- **The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):** The MDGs set by the world's leaders in 2000 are taking on increasing prominence in the international arena as their deadline for achievement in 2015 approaches. While there is no question that these goals are relevant to the Commonwealth's collective mission across the board, advocates seeking action from the Commonwealth on the MDGs would need to very carefully consider what the organisation could contribute to the most ambitious development initiative undertaken. At the 2007 CHOGM held in Kampala, the Commonwealth was generally not regarded by civil society as a successful vehicle for the implementation of the MDGs.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible that the Commonwealth could usefully address a discrete issue that would improve progress towards the MDGs. This could include developing a consensus on how to address one or more of the obstacles currently slowing progress towards achieving the MDGs, such as the failure of development policies to adequately include people with disabilities, despite the fact that they bear a disproportionately large burden of underdevelopment in many settings.
- **Climate Change:** The Commonwealth has played a pioneering role in raising the profile of the dangers posed by climate change, including by commissioning the first research into the effects of climate change in 1987. This is because many of the low-lying small island states most vulnerable to the effects of climate change are Commonwealth members. In 2007, the first document to be issued following the CHOGM leaders' retreat in Kampala was the *Lake Victoria Commonwealth Climate Change Action Plan*. However, the document was the result of settling on the lowest common denominator and has unsurprisingly made little contribution towards an effective global response to climate change.<sup>94</sup> Obviously, any discussions on this issue will take place against the backdrop of the failed attempt to reach binding emission reduction commitments at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference.<sup>95</sup> As a consensus-driven forum, CHOGM will also be unlikely to contribute much towards the resolution of the most pressing issues in this area of international policy but, again, advocates may be able to succeed in getting it to helpfully address any number of subsidiary issues.
- **HIV/AIDS – Legal reform:** Of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS around the world, 60 per cent are Commonwealth citizens, and nine of the most affected countries are Commonwealth members. At the CHOGM held in Durban in 1999, HIV/AIDS was declared to be a 'Global Emergency' and leaders called for greater priority to be attached to developing new preventive interventions and vaccines and reducing the price of anti-retroviral treatment.<sup>96</sup> Despite this, the Commonwealth has made comparatively little progress in addressing major epidemiological drivers such as social and legal discrimination against sexual minorities. For example, only six out of 53 Commonwealth nations have repealed colonial-era anti-sodomy laws. In at least one Commonwealth nation, Uganda, the human rights situation of men who have sex with men has recently been at risk of deteriorating

further with the proposed introduction of the death penalty targeting this group. A recently announced partnership between the International HIV/AIDS Alliance and the Commonwealth Foundation is focused on increasing understanding among Commonwealth governments and civil society of the importance of the legal and social frameworks involved in successfully managing HIV/AIDS. This important initiative will involve an action plan to facilitate civil society dialogue in the key ministerial meetings in the run up to the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting in 2011.

- **Financial Transactions Taxes:** In February 2010, a coalition of more than 50 civil society organisations launched a UK-based campaign to implement a financial transactions tax (FTT) for development ('the Robin Hood Tax'). Coinciding with international outcry over the role of financial institutions in the global financial crisis, the campaign gained impressive traction, with many key policy-makers, economists, academics and political leaders including Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy, Katsuya Okada (formerly Japan's foreign minister), Lord Turner (Chairman of the UK Financial Services Authority), Gordon Brown and the European Parliament all expressing in principle support for such a tax. Presently, however, progress on developing the necessary consensus to implement an FTT for development multilaterally has become entangled in broader discussions about global financial regulatory reform and alternative FTTs for purely regulatory purposes. However, two consistent dissenters in multilateral discussions on the FTT have been Canada and Australia. It is safe to expect that in a forum comprised almost entirely of developing countries, advocacy efforts designed to raise support for a FTT on the economies of rich nations for the benefit of developing ones would be sympathetically received. Given the Commonwealth's demographic make-up, CHOGM could therefore be a prime setting to increase pressure on the Australian and Canadian Governments to play a more constructive role in multilateral discussions and in the implementation of an FTT for development.
- **Disaster Management:** One area where the development of knowledge and the sharing of experience can be usefully facilitated on a multilateral basis is in relation to the management of natural disasters and in addressing the ad hoc nature of the way responses to them are funded.<sup>97</sup> Numerous events in recent years have exposed the vulnerability of Commonwealth's developing states to natural disasters.

One example was the 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake that resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Commonwealth citizens. More recently, extreme flooding in Pakistan in July 2010 of this year has affected a staggering 20 million Commonwealth citizens and created the largest humanitarian crisis in modern history. Such disasters can have a severe impact on major development indicators and progress. There is also mounting evidence suggesting that the increasing frequency and severity of such disasters is driven by climate change.

The new United Nations Chief of Humanitarian Affairs, Baroness Valerie Amos, has only recently called for new ideas and thinking on how the international community can respond to disasters of this scale.<sup>98</sup> This is a very important area of international policy, not least because of the potential for disasters to inflict major development setbacks on vulnerable countries at a crucial point on their road toward achieving the MDGs. Despite this, it is also

relatively under-researched and uncontroversial area of international policy at the present time. As such, a Commonwealth *framework* for developing new disaster management models could secure for the organisation and civil society advocates a major international policy success with the potential to yield significant development dividends.

ISSUES BRIEFING: IN PROGRESS

## Appendix 1: List of Member Countries

The Membership of CHOGM is comprised of 54 independent nations:<sup>99</sup>

- Antigua and Barbuda
- Australia
- The Bahamas
- Bangladesh
- Barbados
- Belize
- Botswana
- Brunei
- Cameroon
- Canada
- Cyprus
- Darussalam
- Dominica
- Fiji Islands\*
- The Gambia
- Ghana
- Grenada
- Guyana
- India
- Jamaica
- Kenya
- Kiribati
- Lesotho
- Malawi
- Mauritius
- Mozambique
- Namibia
- Nauru\*\*
- New Zealand
- Nigeria
- Pakistan
- Papua New Guinea
- Rwanda
- St Kitts and Nevis
- St Lucia
- St Vincent and the Grenadines
- Samoa
- Seychelles
- Sierra Leone
- Singapore
- Solomon Islands
- South Africa
- Sri Lanka
- Swaziland
- Tonga
- Trinidad and Tobago
- Tuvalu
- Uganda

- Malaysia
- Maldives
- Malta
- United Kingdom
- United Republic of Tanzania
- Vanuatu
- Zambia

\*Following the decisions taken by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on 31 July 2009, Fiji Islands was suspended from membership of the Commonwealth on 1 September 2009.

\*\*Nauru is a Member in Arrears.

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, P., 'Critical Champions: Civil Society and Commonwealth Education', *The Round Table*, Vol. 98, No. 405, 2009, p. 727.

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<sup>10</sup> Commonwealth Foundation, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles (1971).

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- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- <sup>22</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat, *About the CFTC*, Site address:  
<[http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/158192/158185/about\\_the\\_cftc/](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/158192/158185/about_the_cftc/)>
- <sup>23</sup> Mayall, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
- <sup>24</sup> Doxey, *op. cit.*, p. 894.
- <sup>25</sup> The Commonwealth Foundation, Site Address: <http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/>
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- <sup>35</sup> Armstrong, D. *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

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- <sup>37</sup> Mayall, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
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- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.
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