

The Informal Forum of Commonwealth Organisations (COs) and the Commonwealth High Level Review¹

Final Draft for Consultation

Submission to HE Anote Tong, Chair, High Level Review Group

Background: Preparing a Submission to CHOGM

On 6 October 2017 the Secretary-General invited the Informal Forum of Commonwealth Organisations (IFCO) to prepare the *Submission by Commonwealth Civil Society Organisations* to the Committee of the Whole. This was to be presented to Senior Officials on 20 March 2018, to feed into the CHOGM Communiqué process. On 13 October 2017, the IFCO conducted a survey of COs' views on proposed themes for the submission. On 6 November 2017, theme paper leads were identified for five papers, one for each of the CHOGM themes (fairness, prosperity, security and sustainability), and a further paper on partnerships. The published version of the final submission is reachable from a link on the home page of the IFCO website at <http://www.ifco.online>

In this contribution to the High Level Review Group we focus on the Preamble and the Partnerships chapters of the submission. They contain key recommendations to build trust in and support for COs within the Secretariat, to enhance the contribution COs can make to Commonwealth joint endeavours. *The key question is how COs can enhance partnerships -- with Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), amongst themselves, and with third parties in support of Commonwealth values and objectives?*

Partnering for Enhanced Impact

The Partnerships chapter (pp. 19-21) highlights the contributions COs already make in a number of policy domains. It also makes specific recommendations to improve the opportunity for COs to help deliver the Strategic Plan. These reflect an understanding that while relationships between the COs and the IGOs in the Commonwealth require attention and improvement, even a modest investment in active COs has the potential for substantial leverage in achieving Strategic Plan goals.

To take one simple and inexpensive example it would be enormously helpful for the Secretariat to publish on the internet the evidence of COs' achievements documented in their brief, annual reports to the Accreditation Committee. It would also help if a harmonised procedure could be developed for Commonwealth Ministerial meetings to ensure expanded policy dialogues to include COs. Consideration should also be given to co-location of COs in hubs outside the UK. In turn, COs have committed to mapping their work against the sustainable development goals, highlighting the specific contributions they can make. To advance this work the open access COs used to have to copies of their own annual reports needs to be restored. It was lost when staffing changes occurred at the Secretariat.

¹ The term Commonwealth organisations (COs) refers to accredited organisations, unless otherwise stated.

Taking Partnership Seriously

When the Commonwealth Foundation's remit shifted to promotion of civil society participation in governance by means of responsive mode funding at national level, core funding of COs by the Foundation ceased, after one final round to help them adjust. Responsibility for COs then transferred to the Secretariat's Partnerships Office. There were promises that the Partnerships Office² would be strengthened and that the new SG would commit to more regular meetings with COs than the biannual meetings conducted by her predecessor. COs then arranged to meet on a quarterly basis, to prepare for more frequent meetings with the SG, and have since met regularly. The SG, however, has only met twice with COs since assuming office in April 2016: on 23 June 2016 and 6 October 2017, with a third meeting offered on 31 July 2018. A meeting scheduled for 1 June 2018 was cancelled at short notice. It is hard to see how a serious partnership between COs and the SG can be achieved if they don't meet at least once a year and uncertainty about the Partnerships Office is resolved.

The CHOGM Communique Process

Although IFCO followed through on the invitation to contribute to the CHOGM Communique, by submitting a report to Senior Officials, by meeting with the Commonwealth Summit Unit at Cabinet Office on 20 December 2017, and then with the CHOGM lead at the Commonwealth Secretariat, Katalaina Sapolu, on 16 January 2018, preparation of the Communiqué was well advanced by then. IFCO has since reviewed its engagement with the CHOGM Communiqué process and has concluded that, subject to resource constraints, several issues need to be addressed.

- Governments need to know that COs currently enjoy only very limited support from the Secretariat and the Foundation.
- COs need clarity about how they may access Ministerials and engage in policy dialogue with Ministers, in the context of a harmonised approach to all Ministerials.
- COs need a more reliable understanding of how recommendations from Ministerial meetings feed into the CHOGM Communique process. Although COs were assured, for example, that space would be held in the Communiqué to accommodate recommendations from the Education Ministers' meeting in Fiji in February 2018 (20CCEM), the very clear recommendation from 20CCEM and IFCO on a Curriculum Framework for the SDGs was not taken up in the CHOGM Communiqué.
- The Secretariat needs to explain whether recommendations from Ministerials are taken seriously and acted upon if they are not also mandated in the CHOGM Communiqué. If they are not, then COs need to re-evaluate their participation in Ministerial meetings.
- The High Level Review Group needs to consider the implications of adverse press comment on the Commonwealth brand for the Commonwealth as a whole, but particularly for COs, dependent as they are on voluntary contributions .

² Commonwealth Secretariat's Rapid Review, Lord Patel of Bradford, July 2016

The Partnerships Office

From the beginning of its work IFCO had an efficient and productive relationship with Emma Kerr, the Partnerships Officer. She was responsive to requests for information and help with analysis. She also arranged a programme of valuable training events for COs, but these have ceased since Emma's departure at the end of December 2017, without any explanation or discussion with COs. Emma's engagement with COs was supported professionally and enthusiastically by her line manager, Lauren Stasinowsky, but she left to return to Australia at the end of January 2018. After that date, an acting Partnerships Officer, Jamie Wiles, was quick to respond to communications from IFCO until the submission to the COW was delivered. Since then, communications and questions may be left unanswered, and a different management style with regard to COs appears to have been adopted by the Secretariat, again without any clear explanation.

The Health and Education Unit

Decisions about changes to the structure of the Secretariat and the way it operates need to be evidence-based and openly discussed with COs. Concerns about the Partnerships Office are underscored by what happened to the Secretariat's Health and Education Unit (HEU) in 2017. The basis for the decision to disband this office was not plausibly demonstrated to COs, who had argued that it should at least have been deferred until after the then imminent meetings of health ministers in May 2017 and of education ministers in February 2018. HEU was the Secretariat's key interlocutor with nearly 40 percent of the total number of COs. But this was not properly taken into account in the decision to close HEU, and there remain questions about the priority that issues of human development will now be given in the Commonwealth.

The larger significance of what happened to the HEU is that it raises for the High Level Review Group doubts about the application in the Secretariat of international norms of good practice for human resources management and access to information. As a result of restructuring decisions, three senior and widely respected women have left the Secretariat in the past year or so (DSG Josephine Ojiambo, and Heads of Division Katherine Ellis and Joanne Nurse). And it would be good to know that at a minimum the High Level Review will consult with those who left, to hear their assessments. In the case of the HEU, for example, COs were assured that health and education would be 'mainstreamed' across the Secretariat. But there has not to date been any explanation of who is responsible for doing this or what exactly is going to be mainstreamed. The refusal to disclose the Delivery Plan, which should explain the allocation of resources within the Secretariat, illustrates problems of transparency and accountability in the context of Secretariat relations with COs.

There could be major benefits, then, from adoption by the Secretariat of international norms of good practice in human resources management, and from the use across the Secretariat of transparent processes for assigning personnel and allocating resources; processes that would include the use of detailed budget statements and the preparation and publication of delivery plans when organizational units are restructured. International good practices could also be mirrored by adopting a Freedom of Information policy for the Commonwealth and the appointment of a Commonwealth Ombudsperson.

Conclusion

Overall, while there ended up being much in the 2018 CHOGM Communiqué that IFCO recommended, and welcomes, there remains a set of serious issues that the High Level Review Group needs to take on board, issues which, if they were addressed forthrightly, would help the Commonwealth leverage scarce resources, protect the Commonwealth brand, and build the mutual trust required for there to be a successful partnership between the Commonwealth and its COs. That partnership is essential to the realisation of Commonwealth values and priorities.

Dr Nicholas Watts FRSA, Convenor, IFCO, 30 June 2018

(Please note: This is submitted in a personal capacity, subject to consultation with Commonwealth Organisations. The supporting documents referenced in the text are readily accessible from the IFCO website, and can also be provided as pdf files, if that would be helpful.)