

# Additional Inputs by COs to the Work of the HLG

December, 2018

There has been widespread approval of the list of issues raised for the attention of the HLG as documented in the earlier attachments for the agenda for the 3 December IFCO. Most COs are happy that the concerns they have voiced have been heard and addressed. There have also been three new submissions.

One makes clear, constructive and specific proposals for renewing the process of CO engagement with and by ComSec. One is a narrative many will recognise as representative of the complex and discouraging process of CO engagement with ComSec as it presently exists. And one addresses the SDGs and the archiving of CO contributions to the achievement of those goals. The first two contributions illustrate the way ComSec frequently fails to reflect the values of the Commonwealth Charter in its own procedures and behaviour.

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## **New Submission 1.**

The key points made in the HLG's summary report back to COs on 21 November prompt five further observations.

### **A. COs are concerned about the selectiveness of accreditation, the Commonwealth perspective and mandate.**

There should probably be four categories of Commonwealth-accredited organisations other than the three CW IGOs and governments: (1) Organisations of public bodies and government employees (local government, tax administrators, CW telecommunications etc) - the current 'associated organisations'; (2) Organisations of Commonwealth professionals or of 'Commonwealth-builders' committed to strengthening CW collaboration; (3) Regional bodies with majority CW membership in e.g. Africa, Caribbean, Pacific; and (4) NGOs working largely in CW countries and ready to work with CW IGOs but not in any way committed to promoting the CW as such.

Even here the boundaries are difficult to draw as, for example, in making the distinction between categories (1) and (2), above, are universities and polytechnics 'public bodies' and should ACU be an associated organisation? Similarly, are not the majority of health workers and teachers public employees in most CW countries?

In category 2, the Commonwealth needs to think carefully about its accreditation criteria. Some CW NGOs have branches and members across the CW regions, but others, while they are open to members from anywhere in the CW, do not. They may, however, actively engage in CW studies and relationships, as does the ICwS, for example.

Having determined a set of categories, and the criteria by which COs can qualify for accreditation, the HLG needs to specify the entitlements each category will have in terms of invitations to attend different types of meeting, rights to make submissions, preference in award of contracts, the right to use the CW logo on stationery and for publicity, among other things.

**B. There needs to be more effective ComSec collaboration with COs and better access for COs to ComSec, so that COs do not feel excluded and prevented from access.**

This is partly a matter of physical arrangements, such as the current system of issuing permanent passes for access to Marlborough House, and partly a matter of access to information – disappointment with the secretiveness and lack of transparency of ComSec in relation to budget, staffing, strategic and annual delivery plans, organisation charts and the inconvenience of Huddle. It is also in part an organisational issue, as in the evident need for an established liaison point with civil society in each area of ComSec’s work, with regular liaison meetings. There also needs to be a better two-way traffic when there are opportunities for dialogue with the Secretary General. Dialogue typically turns into monologue, with the role of civil society representatives being reduced to asking limited questions and making brief comments on ComSec presentations. More joint working groups would be one helpful way to tap civil society professional expertise.

**C. The work programmes of COs and ComSec are not aligned, and their synergies not optimised - across all areas. There is concern that ComSec is acting in competition with COs.**

Fault lies on both sides here. CW accredited organisations have failed in the past to pull together in a constructive, collective way to highlight the value of their work, although they are now striving to remedy that. It would be helpful if there were a promise of a £100k p.a. grant over 5 years from say the CF to IFCO, in exchange for which CW associations would be expected to come up by the start of the financial year beginning on July 1, 2019 with a credible institutional structure and programme for ensuring that the work of CW associations and of ComSec are mutually supportive.

CW accredited organisations need to be more proactive in making known their own programmes and capacities. And for their part the IGOs should recognize that under their current policies turnover of staff is too rapid to enable the development of long-term professional relationships with CW associations. The different units in ComSec would benefit from more autonomy in taking initiatives that build on the contributions CW associations are making.

It is also the case that the gap between ComSec’s principal areas of work and CO areas of professional interest and strength has widened. This was not so when CFTC, for example, was more active in technical assistance, when bodies like the CW Science Council were active, when education, health and management development were accepted and adequately-staffed CW priorities, and when the CW Foundation actively promoted professional linkages across the CW. Some COs that came into existence and thrived when their spheres of activity once coincided with ComSec priorities probably have difficulty now in identifying a supportive and knowledgeable contact point in Marlborough House. In terms of professional expertise, ComSec is a pale shadow of its former self and, more seriously even lacks in many areas enough knowledge and capacity to tap usefully the expertise and networks that its potential CO partners would be able to share.

**D. COs are concerned about the lack of access to key decisions in the Commonwealth, governance bodies and strategic/organisational planning processes.**

There should be an established, public forum where for, say, three days each year the work of the three Commonwealth IGOs is presented, examined, explained, and debated in response to questions, following the model of Parliamentary Select Committee enquiries. This could either be formal, with a body like the CW Parliamentary Association doing the questioning, or more

informal, featuring a dialogue between the IGOs and sympathetic outsiders. The present lack of transparency and public accountability is totally contrary to the claims the CW makes for itself.

#### **E. COs lack meaningful access to funding (directed to ComSec)**

See section C, above, for a suggestion about how to provide collective support. There also need to be established procedures for accredited organisations to bid individually for CW IGO work, such as projects and studies that are being contracted out.

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### **New Submission 2.**

I am afraid the Commonwealth Journalists Association (CJA) has not been very much involved in drawing up representations to the High-Level Group, but as you had asked for any last-minute ideas about how to improve the complex and discouraging process of CO engagement with ComSec we thought we would send you this note. It draws on our experience of liaising with the Secretariat on the Media Principles initiative, and before that our experience in seeking Secretariat input for a conference on Media and Governance in Sri Lanka and the wider Commonwealth.

Though we now have a clear channel of communication with the Secretariat for our discussions about the Commonwealth Media Principles, it has not always been clear who is the contact point or the spokesperson for Freedom of Expression or Media issues. In seeking a speaker from the Secretariat for the Sri Lanka conference two or three years ago, we went around and around in circles for weeks, constantly being put off by different departments, and only got someone at the last minute when the Director of Political Affairs made a decision. It seems clear that much decision-making in the Secretariat is centralised and even heads of department sometimes seem reluctant to take responsibility in such matters.

We hope one of the results of this High Level Review will be that the Secretariat adopts a more explicitly open and cooperative approach to civil society and the accredited organisations.

In theory it is committed to this already – as the Secretary General made clear in her recent One People Oration at Westminster Abbey. But although she has her own valuable regular meetings with the accredited organisations, that spirit of openness and cooperation does not seem to filter down to her lieutenants.

We know that some clusters of Commonwealth organisations do have reasonably close working relations with specific departments or individuals in the Secretariat. But this seems to happen in a rather ad hoc way.

As part of the Secretariat's new approach to Civil Society, we wonder whether it might make sense for the job descriptions of key subject managers to include regular liaison with civil society groups, say every three months, so there can be an exchange of information about Secretariat policies and programmes and the concerns of civil society.

These subject managers should also be the focal points for pressing issues – capable of escalating them to a higher level in the Secretariat when civil society makes the case for a change of policy or more urgent action is required on specific matters. It seems obvious that for any partnership between the Secretariat and Civil Society to thrive, a clearer set of structures and responsibilities needs to be put in place.

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### **New Submission 3.**

A third set of comments address the work of the Commonwealth in relation to (A) the SDGs, (B) lifelong education after the disbanding of the Health and Education Unit at ComSec, and (C) archiving the work and achievements of COs.

#### **A. COs are helpful to CW member countries to demonstrate progress on SDGs.**

COs are engaged in a range of local, national and international (Pan-Commonwealth) development activities. COs are good examples of advocacy/service provision. Member countries could use them as case studies for demonstrating progress on SDGs, especially while submitting their annual Voluntary National Reviews.

#### **B. Key areas in education, such as Early Years Education, need to be covered in arrangements for replacing the work of the Education and Health Unit.**

While recognising the crucial importance of the work done by COL and ACU in the field of education, especially in the context of closure/downsizing of the Education and Health Unit, the current arrangement does not seek to cover adequately several key areas such as Early Years Education.

#### **C. The Commonwealth Library in the Commonwealth Secretariat could take responsibility for archiving the work of COs.**

General attempts at archiving of digital material (especially websites) by institutions such as the British Library in London may not be sufficient in scope or cover all Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth Library in the Commonwealth Secretariat could play a crucial role in archiving and may be given the responsibility for undertaking this work on an ongoing basis.

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Responses from COs to the HLG's summary report made several other points, including the lack of clear notice, well in advance, of how COs might be able to contribute constructively to events and programmes the Secretariat plans to undertake.

One example of this relates to the 'Commonwealth@70' celebration. COs were given seven working days in which to respond to a request to engage with this celebration. Their response was then referred back to them, with a further request that they sort out among themselves who would represent them at the celebration, but still without any indication at all of how the 'Commonwealth@70' would be celebrated, or even what value the Secretariat itself attached to a 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

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