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Nicholas Watts

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OPINION



Commonwealth Organisations: Third Pillar of the Commonwealth?

Nicholas Watts

Almost 30 years ago, David McIntyre argued that Commonwealth Accredited Organisations (COs) could be seen as the key instrumentality through which widely shared Commonwealth ideals could be realised on a day-to-day basis.¹ The promise McIntyre saw in COs as a potential ‘third pillar’ of the Commonwealth has yet to be fulfilled.

The COs represents in many ways a tremendous resource for doing good in the world. But their operating environment has changed. They have lost their access to core funding from the Commonwealth Foundation and must now compete for grants alongside organisations that are in the Commonwealth but not accredited. (Since 2015, only three of the 53 Foundation grants awarded have been to COs. The grants have been concentrated in Africa (26) and Asia (21) with the Caribbean (4), Europe (1) and the Pacific (1) less successful.) And COs’ relationship to the Commonwealth is now via the Secretariat, which is seeking a new partnership with them, but lacks the resource to support them financially. Ironically, since the Foundation coordinates the Peoples Forum, an innovation introduced by COs at the Edinburgh 1997 CHOGM, there is no guarantee of access for COs to the London Peoples Forum.

In the Pacific, where only a minority of Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) are members of the Foundation, recent initiatives of Fiji merit attention. Having co-hosted the UN Ocean Conference in New York and the Bonn COP23 UN Climate Change Conference in 2017, it will host the 20th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, before CHOGM. This SIDS lead in promoting a model of development resilient to climate change and sustainability challenges in oceans and fisheries demonstrates what the global South can teach us, highlights a new regional cohesion across the Pacific and promises better integration of Pacific COs in the Commonwealth policy discourse given the region’s limited membership of the Foundation.

COs are a diverse group, operating under widely varying forms of organisation, rules of membership, sources of financial support, and norms of governance. For the Commonwealth to harness and direct their potential would require investment of time and money that neither Member States nor the Secretariat appear ready to make, and the Foundation can no longer do so. However, recently COs have mobilised to take the initiative by engaging in quarterly meetings of an Informal Forum of Commonwealth Organisations (IFCO), set up

to aid engagement with the Secretariat. In preparation for an imminent UK CHOGM, COs are investing considerable effort in the biennial process of advocating for policy positions in the CHOGM Communiqué. This is an opportunity to demonstrate what COs could contribute, given a receptive Secretariat and Heads, to delivery of a new *Commonwealth Development Paradigm*. In Malta, Heads agreed to present a common position in support of both the Paris Accord and the Global Goals. The principle of universality in the Goals (SDGs) is perfectly suited to implementation by an international set of organisations from North and South, consistent with the SDGs, the Paris Agenda and within planetary boundaries. And a cooperation of the Secretariat with COs has recently produced a *Commonwealth Curriculum Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals*, which could serve as the basis for production of the skills needed for implementation of the SDGs across the Commonwealth.

In 2015, COs committed to a reflective analysis of their own capacities and performance, and the IFCO has used COs' 2015 Annual Reports to map thematic groupings across the fields of Health, Education, Human Rights and Law, Culture and Media, Accounting, and Business. This has been followed by an in-depth analysis of the Education Sector which may serve as a model for review of the other sectors. When the Foundation was reviewing its policy of funding COs in 2013, there was no available analysis of COs or adequate documentation by COs of their own contribution.

The lack of understanding of COs' potential contribution was reflected in the failure of a recent campaign by education COs to save the Secretariat's Health and Education Unit from closure. COs were assured that health and education would be 'mainstreamed' in the new organisational structure, but until the Secretariat releases the Delivery Plan, it is not clear how they will be mainstreamed.

Governance of COs is a further issue. The Secretariat has an Accreditation Committee that should be in a position to address questions of ethics and governance of COs, and which is currently consulting with COs about their classification into 'Associated' and 'Accredited' categories. This consultation could usefully be extended to include the question of the benefit of the 'Commonwealth' brand, not always a benefit when seeking funding; as well as governance issues.

If COs are to make an effective 'third pillar' of the Commonwealth, there needs to be work on both sides of the relationship. COs comprise some 10 Associated Organisations that have a quasi-governmental role (e.g. Commonwealth Local Government Forum, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association), and another 85 Accredited Organisations. Of these, one in four is headquartered outside London. They can be grouped thematically across several domains: education; health/medicine; law; human rights; human settlements; social welfare/wellbeing; and finance, accountancy and business. Most of these groupings have their origins in the Commonwealth professional bodies, with a number of advocacy organisations accredited more recently, by an Accreditation Committee set up in 2003. Since 2015, COs have been required to supply annual reports. In the context of major turnover of staff at the Secretariat, COs best represent the institutional memory of the Commonwealth. Groupings of cognate COs would help with two-way access between the formal and the informal Commonwealth.

The COs have had successes. The Commonwealth Fisheries Programme, a partnership of COs with the Foundation, helped put the Blue Economy on the Secretariat's agenda, and with initiatives by SIDS, this has become a key commitment. COs also have major achievements in their own right, such as the success of the Commonwealth Rotary in polio eradication,

of the Commonwealth Medical Association in its Digital Health programme, as well as successful international conferences and events organised by a range of the professional bodies (e.g. Commonwealth Association of Museums—CAM, Council for Education in the Commonwealth—CEC, Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association—CMJA, Commonwealth Local Government Forum—CLGF, etc.), meetings that promote good practice and simultaneously raise the profile of the Commonwealth and enhance its brand.

COs are perhaps far from being an effective, or indeed recognised, third pillar of the Commonwealth, but they should be, by governments as well as by COs themselves. They have more pan-Commonwealth coverage, unlike the Foundation, which is weaker in the Pacific. There are missed opportunities in funding for international cooperative projects, threats of vital COs dropping the Commonwealth brand (and others damaging it), yet the COs themselves have it in their own hands to demonstrate—and publicise—their capacity to achieve, and to work across silos, to help deliver a *Commonwealth Development Paradigm* consistent with the Charter, the SDGs and the Paris accord, working over the next two years of the UK's term as Chair in Office. They need the support of the Intergovernmental Commonwealth in this endeavour.

Note

1. W. David McIntyre, *The Significance of the Commonwealth, 1965–1990* (London: Macmillan, 1991).