

# People power

## The Commonwealth's third sector

**Mark Collins, Director, Commonwealth Foundation**

This article takes a look at both the challenges and the opportunities that present themselves as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the modern Commonwealth.

It is often said that the Commonwealth is more an association of peoples than of governments. But why should that be so? Perhaps it's because there are more than 80 people's organisations and networks in the Commonwealth, many of which long predate the switch from dominion to free association in 1949, and the creation of an administrative Secretariat in 1965. Some are more than a century old. People-to-people connections are so important that the Commonwealth Foundation was established by governments specifically to attend to their needs.

Nowadays people have become networked on a scale unimagined even 25 years ago, never mind a century. How relevant and robust is the Commonwealth's third sector in this interconnected world? What are the drivers that shape civil society today, and how do they affect our Commonwealth of peoples? With the pressures of global markets and new technologies, will our people's organisations be strong enough to take on the competition?

### New ways of working

The rise of democracies and the associated freedom of speech, free trade and the sharing of information through the internet and mobile telephones have shifted power decisively away from institutions and into the hands of ordinary men and women. With internet connections available to many, the Commonwealth of peoples is becoming a Commonwealth of individuals, each able to establish and assert their own particular set of identities and values,

and interact with others in ways never before imagined. Social networks, free-flowing and ever-changing, allow people to associate and disassociate easily, and at small cost. People are demanding and getting information on tap.

For example, at one time it was difficult to learn of human rights transgressions, but today we learn about them very quickly. As a result, human rights NGOs are demanding earlier sanctions against governments that apply the Commonwealth name but ignore its principles. They want the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) to act quickly rather than allow irregularities and even atrocities to proceed with impunity for too long. In an interconnected world, the Commonwealth's third sector is more active and its governments are under more public pressure.

Individualism, fuelled by consumer choice and a healthy tendency to question rather than defer to the establishment and its structures, is impacting on the way people are engaging. Independence and preference are demonstrated through selection of ethical fashions, organic produce or fair-trade goods. Blogs and similar technologies put the individual directly in touch with most of the planet, without paying a subscription or going through a hierarchy of tiresome authorisations, gatekeepers and censorship. Participative democracy has never been easier; individual expression and action are on the increase. Activists have shown how they can join up around the world to 'make poverty history', take personal action to reduce carbon emissions or donate to the tsunami appeal. Atomisation is here to stay.

### Friends of the Commonwealth: a new approach to networking

'Friends of the Commonwealth' is a new charity, launched at the Kampala CHOGM 2007, now with 2,000 supporters and growing quickly. The scheme recognises some contemporary trends:

- the demand for internet-based communication and social networking
- the potential for social enterprise, and
- the desire to contribute as individuals to community-led projects.

The challenge for Friends is to build a workable business plan. Recognising that collection of subscriptions for administration would not be cost-effective, participation is free. The focus is on

identifying local projects with community support, and twinning that with fundraising in the UK. It is still early days, but London Friends is organising fundraising events while at the same time helping more than 800 Friends in Uganda to create a corporate framework with its own momentum. More national chapters are envisaged, enabling people to contribute as individuals or communities to charitable projects.

The key is to strengthen communication. A new Commonwealth internet portal with information and social networking features open to all Commonwealth individuals and organisations is planned. Through a new Friends website, all Commonwealth organisations will soon be able to upload information and notices.

Commonwealth people's organisations need to understand all this if they are to move forward in the way they communicate, network and influence. In Commonwealth societies open to free expression, successful civil society organisations are indeed recognising and embracing today's trends. They invest in mass communication to build support not just for an annual subscription and loyalty to a brand, but for intellectual buy-in to their cause and campaigns, and commitment to their professionalism and influential reach.

## Social enterprise and service provision

If membership subscriptions are becoming a less popular business model, how do you pay the bills? There must be a way because in the United Kingdom, for example, 865,000 civil society organisations earned £109 billion in 2005–06.<sup>1</sup> Expenditure grew by 15 per cent on the previous year, far outstripping growth in the national economy. What's the secret of their success?

In part their growth is due to the blurring of boundaries between the third sector, government and the private sector. More than half of general charity income in the UK is now earned through public service delivery contracts with national and local government, and the expansion of enterprising activity. But where charities are gaining income principally from service provision, or from targeted appeals, the taxpayer and the consumer are footing the bill, and they won't pay membership on top!

This raises new questions about accountability, ownership and leadership in the third sector. Are large and successful charities still guided by the ideals of loyal members? Or are they driven by market forces and the lure of government contracts? Certainly some developing country governments see large international NGOs not as objective and independent idealists fighting for a just cause, but as a threat to their power, creatures of donor governments, influencing and controlling by stealth. Others see non-governmental organisations as unelected *faux* representatives, masquerading as the voice of the people. It's easy enough to say this, and generally unjust. But there can be an element of truth too, and accountability and transparency are ever more important issues when NGO income is largely derived from services provided on behalf of governments.

Across many of the less developed countries of the Commonwealth these shifts in how civil society works are yet to become apparent, but the transitions will occur, perhaps quicker



*A schoolgirl in India does her homework. The Commonwealth Foundation believes in education being the foundation for development*

than expected. By leapfrogging the old ways, developing countries will soon catch up. In low income countries NGOs find it difficult to attract paying members, so why bother to jump through the hoops of building up a membership that pays too little and demands too much when a few contracts from local, national or donor governments can do the job more quickly and effectively?

Social enterprise organisations may well overtake the more traditional charities, creating new forms of association that are just as motivated and equally value-driven but, on the downside, perhaps more susceptible to short-termism and fashion. In such circumstances good governance is essential and capacity-building exercises would do well to focus less on building membership

## Delivering services through partnership projects

Professional associations across the Commonwealth have access to significant human resources and experience that can be of great benefit if mobilised to address key issues of the day. The Commonwealth Foundation is managing two projects, each of which engages two Commonwealth networks in its implementation.

- Building Human Rights Capacity in the Overseas Territories of the UK benefits from the technical knowledge of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and the Commonwealth Legal Education Association and is funded by the Department for International Development (DFID).

- Marine Fisheries Management and Coastal Zone Communities in the Commonwealth has teams from the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council and the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit engaged in case studies, workshops and research across the Indian and Pacific oceans, and is funded by the DFID and AusAid.

This model is working well and plans are in train to implement a project on the State of Commonwealth Cities with the Commonwealth Association of Planners and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum.

## Broadcasting the message

'For me, the CBA is the Commonwealth.' This was what a broadcaster said to a Commonwealth civil servant when they found themselves together on a plane. He explained that this was the part of the Commonwealth which touched him directly. For him the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA) offered a route into a wider world, with undreamed-of opportunities through training and bursaries.

With a core staff of four, plus two part-timers, the CBA runs a training programme for its membership of more than 100 broadcasting organisations. In the last few years it has developed seven unique distance learning courses. It also campaigns for media freedom and high editorial standards: key values for the Commonwealth brand. The members meet every two years at an all-Commonwealth conference, with a regional conference in the year between.

The CBA partners the Commonwealth Foundation in producing the Commonwealth Short Story Awards, which receive up to 3,000 entries annually from all round the Commonwealth. CBA broadcasting stations organise local presentations and broadcast the stories widely. With support from the Secretariat the CBA also offers a monthly radio programme for broadcasting: *Pick of the Commonwealth*.

The CBA sees a good future for its services by offering excellent value for money to its members. At the same time, many of its activities are best delivered through partnerships with the Commonwealth Foundation, the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth aid agencies, UNESCO and other key players.

**Elizabeth Smith, CBA Secretary-General**

associations and more on building governing boards that work and managers that understand strategy, competition and, most of all, how to build and protect their precious value base.

## Brand, values and civil society in the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth scores by having both a solid brand that brings associations together and keeps them in business (this is self-evident from the impressive survival rate of the 80 or so Commonwealth organisations and associations), and a strong set of core principles and values to underpin civil society networks and campaigns. But we should not underestimate the need to refresh the brand and check up on the currency of the underlying principles and values.

Many worry that the Commonwealth brand has fallen into a genteel decline as a result of paring of financial resources, self-effacing communications and loss of political influence. Commonwealth civil society is certainly in favour of a major investment to reverse these damaging trends.

Similarly, civil society needs the Commonwealth to ensure that its agreed principles are updated and adhered to by governments.

A sense of core values, a determination to protect them, and a unique propensity to call to account those governments that don't, lies at the heart of what binds the people's Commonwealth together. But it would be complacent to believe that Commonwealth values and principles are fixed, permanent or universally admired and implemented. The twin 1966 human rights covenants (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), which came into force in 1976, have still only been ratified by about two-thirds of Commonwealth countries!<sup>2</sup>

It has been a long time since the adoption of the Singapore (1971) and Harare (1991) Declarations. Do they still reflect the beliefs and needs of the people's Commonwealth in the twenty-first century? One interpretation of the robust and detailed message in the civil society statement<sup>3</sup> to the 2007 Kampala CHOGM is that it is time for the Commonwealth to take a fresh look.

Inevitably the ebb and flow of world affairs will cast light of various hues on the practices of the Commonwealth, and successful new models may compel us to review and align with emergent forms of democracy. For example, there are voices in Africa that say single party politics can, in theory, be just as democratic as multiparty

## Sustaining the Commonwealth's forests

Never before have the Commonwealth's forests been more important, yet their future less certain. As climate change kicks in, forests are under the spotlight both as major contributors to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and as a principal means of carbon storage.\*

Members of the Commonwealth Forestry Association (CFA), including foresters, scientists, students and policy-makers know that to promote sustainable forest management they need to work at all levels, from individuals to groups, from large corporations to small NGOs, and from young students to foresters with a lifetime's experience.

Information flows in different ways to different people, and to cater for this CFA provides the latest scientific knowledge in the *International Forestry Review* journal, while the quarterly newsletter covers the most important news and views. They host meetings where foresters can learn from the experiences of others, and provide international training awards to young foresters from around the Commonwealth. The internet has added tremendous possibilities to serve members – whether it is through internet-based meetings, online publication or just the day-to-day ease of communication.

With forests at centre stage for climate change as well as economic advancement for many countries, the CFA is working with its citizens to promote a sustainable future for Commonwealth forests and sustainable livelihoods for those who live in and around them.

**Alan Pottinger, Technical Director, Commonwealth Forestry Association**

\* CFA (2007), Commonwealth Forests. *Commonwealth Forestry Association*.



*A panel of experts from the Commonwealth Foundation's briefing on the state of marine fisheries*

politics, and can be helpful when dealing with ethnic divides. Alternative ideas deserve to be given full consideration even though, it has to be said, neither single party dominance nor multiparty coalitions have served Africa particularly well to date.

Similarly culture, once valued mainly for its entertainment value, is fast finding a place on the political stage. An appreciation, indeed celebration, of cultural heritage is now considered central to sustainable development and a progressive nation proud of its many identities.<sup>4</sup> Civil coalitions on cultural diversity are leading the way in persuading governments to appreciate the development value of cultural expression. Yet the Harare Principles say nothing about this.

### **Professional associations**

The people's Commonwealth was founded on networks of professionals who were on the sharp end of development as long as a century ago. Engineers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, foresters, media, administrators and a host of other specialists came together to exchange the latest ideas, create training opportunities and support each other in what were often challenging circumstances where communications were poor and a little peer support went a

long way. Remarkably, while some have merged or closed as technologies have moved on, dozens are still in business today and continue to provide unique and highly valued services.

The secret of their success has been to move with the times and remain relevant, adding value to their membership and providing support that is hard to find elsewhere. In some cases consolidation and mergers have proved effective, and we may well see more of these.

Challenges to such pan-Commonwealth networks are considerable. One of the questions most frequently asked is how they differ from global networks of a similar ilk. To many of us the answer is clear: they address issues and needs that are more meaningful to countries that share the Commonwealth brand, traditions, language and values. In short, they are more accessible and meaningful than the wider global groups, and they enjoy an identifiable and respected brand – the Commonwealth.

Those that can boast success have not let the grass grow under their feet. They have diversified their audiences (some well beyond the Commonwealth), built a flexible culture that adapts to the changing needs of their members, and adopted the ways of the successful international NGOs by building partnerships and

## Education in the Commonwealth

Sir Shridath (Sonny) Ramphal said that the fabric of the Commonwealth community is woven from the three golden threads of language, law and learning. Certainly the third of these is the basis for many networks in the people's Commonwealth where educational bodies like the Commonwealth Institute (now the Commonwealth Education Trust), League for Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers and Association of Commonwealth Universities were founded in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

The common use of English, congruence in the organisation of school systems and in qualification structures, and similarities in curricular approaches have facilitated substantial flows of students and teachers between member countries and the creation of hundreds of school and college links across the Commonwealth.

These days, more than two dozen Commonwealth associations are based in the education sector, including networks of examination bodies and universities, teachers and education administrators,

language, literature and science specialists. They recently formed the Commonwealth Consortium for Education, in particular to provide a stronger focus for international priorities such as 'Education for All' and those Millennium Development Goals that aim for universal primary schooling and gender equality in education, to which the Commonwealth attaches great significance.

Education is vital in empowering individuals to reach their full potential in labour markets, community activities and political processes, and in contributing to the resolution of the global challenges of the twenty-first century – climate change and the environment, poverty eradication, democracy and good governance, security and community cohesion. By reviewing and adjusting their vision and structures, Commonwealth education associations continue to contribute, building on more than a century's experience.

**Peter Williams, Secretary, Commonwealth Consortium for Education**

entering into service delivery contracts with governmental and intergovernmental bodies. At the same time they are vociferous in demanding that the Commonwealth brand should not be allowed to slip into history. That pressure will need to be kept up.

The Commonwealth Foundation provides grants to about 20 such organisations, favouring those that deliver campaigns, analyses and measurable outcomes. Core funds for networking have largely been replaced by projects and activities based on full cost recovery – that is, with a full contribution to administrative overheads. There has also been some success in identifying donor-supported projects that can utilise the unique skills and expertise of the professional networks, mobilising them to address clearly identified needs (see box titled 'Delivering services through partnership projects').

## Conclusion

The Commonwealth has a rich tradition of professional associations and civil society organisations. They are bound by a long history, a wealth of invaluable experience and shared principles and practices in culture, democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, language, law and education. Commonwealth member governments, the Secretariat and the Foundation are committed to strengthening civil society organisations, encouraging them to play a growing part in all aspects of nation building and international relations. They provide a vast resource that needs to be mobilised and partnered as effectively as possible in the service of peace and community cohesion, good governance and democracy, and sustainable development in all its aspects.

The future success of our professional associations and NGOs depends on respect for the Commonwealth brand and its founding principles and values, which have stood the test of time but need to be maintained, evaluated regularly and enhanced in order to address contemporary challenges.

Civil society organisations come in many shapes and sizes and long may it be so. But their form must follow function. It is crucial to remain focused on services and outcomes; competitive in terms of value for money; and contemporary in terms of attracting supporters through modern networking and membership schemes, and effective use of innovative technologies. With this toolkit, the people's Commonwealth has a bright future. Indeed it might be the future for our unique association of nations.

## Endnotes

- 1 National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2008), *Voluntary Sector Strategic Analysis 2008/09*. NCVO, London. Quoted data include general charities, co-operatives, universities and housing associations.
- 2 Sen, P (ed.) (2008), *Human Rights in the Commonwealth: A Status Report*. Commonwealth Secretariat, London.
- 3 Commonwealth Foundation (2008), *Realising People's Potential: The Kampala Civil Society Statement to the 2007 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting*. Commonwealth Foundation, London.
- 4 Commonwealth Foundation (2008), *Putting Culture First*. Commonwealth Foundation, London.

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