

# The Commonwealth Foundation Partnerships for Progress

True social justice requires a change in what is considered acceptable behaviour toward women and between women and men. Dealing with the pervasive violations of women's rights requires that we break the mould in our thinking and our actions.

– Graça Machel, (then) Chair,  
Commonwealth Foundation, 2002

The remit of the Commonwealth Foundation, which is funded by Commonwealth governments, is to strengthen civil society in the achievement of Commonwealth priorities, especially those of good governance, people-centred sustainable development, and poverty eradication. The Foundation facilitates pan-Commonwealth and inter-country connections between people, their associations and communities.

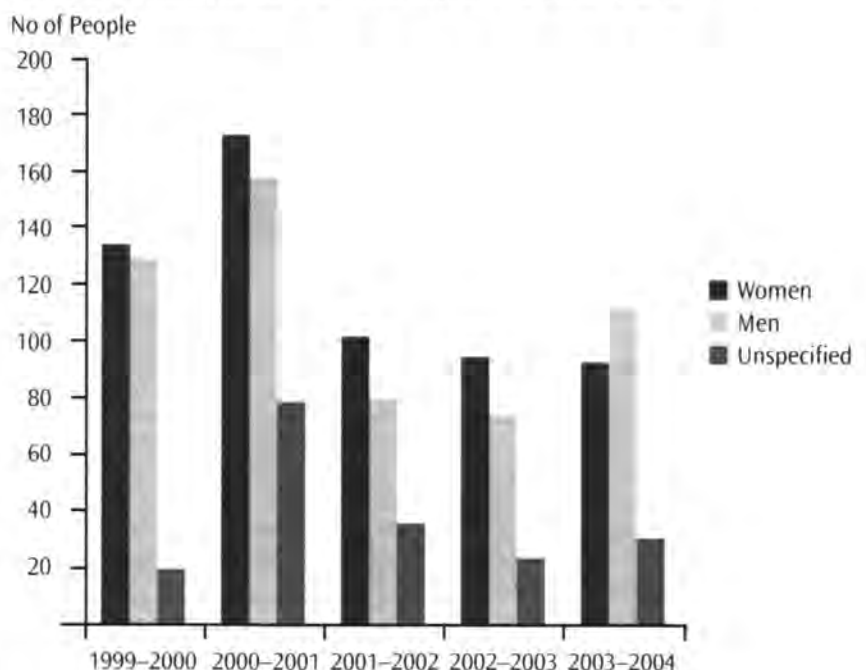
One of the Foundation's core principles is to 'support and encourage programmes and activities that promote gender equality, and encourage gender equitable approaches within its own and partner organisations'.

It is increasingly accepted by the Commonwealth and the development community at large that to mainstream gender issues requires not just involvement of, but also partnership with, civil society. The focus of the Foundation's work is to build and nurture such partnerships. Through its work with civil society, the Foundation supports areas outlined in the Commonwealth Plans of Action (PoAs) on gender equality since 1995.

Established in 1965, the Foundation originally existed to support the many pan-Commonwealth professional associations which operate throughout the Commonwealth. Through its links with a spectrum of Commonwealth associations, the Foundation became increasingly involved with the non-governmental sector in Commonwealth countries. While some of the Foundation's work continues to support the professional associations, the focus of its work widened to support the work of non-governmental and voluntary organisations, faith-based organisations, trade unions and media, or what is now widely referred to as 'civil society'.

The Foundation works to increase the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) and their constituencies, to facilitate their communication with development partners, and to increase their accountability. The Foundation's publication *Non-Governmental Organisations: Guidelines for Good Policy and Practice* was published in 1996 and has since been translated into 13 languages.

**Chart 3.1: Commonwealth Foundation Grants 1999 to 2004**



*Civil society leadership, participation and actions are recognised as critical components of a fully democratic society*

## How the Foundation Works

The Foundation is committed to creating opportunities for civil society-government dialogue and collaboration in working towards development and democracy.

The Foundation supports CSOs which require assistance to engage with governments and development partners. Such assistance includes developing training materials for CSOs, funding workshops for CSOs and governments at regional and global levels, building the capacity of CSOs and their representatives, developing the capacity of governments to work with CSOs, funding the participation of CSOs in ministerial and other governmental meetings, and providing support for CSO advocacy work at such meetings.

The mechanisms through which the Foundation is able to support this work are its grant-giving facility (both responsive grants to applications from CSOs – over £300,000 each year – and annual core grants provided to Commonwealth associations – which total over £400,000 each year); and through its programme work, which focuses on creating space for civil society at government meetings, and targets long-term support to key regional CSOs.

A substantial number of grants have been awarded to projects whose specific focus is gender equality. From 2001–2004, over £60,000 in such grants had been awarded. All grants are awarded on the basis that, where possible, at least half the participants are women.

## Mainstreaming Civil Society Participation

The Commonwealth's 1995 PoA on Gender and Development recognised the need for civil society to be involved in democratic processes in order to set gender-aware policies and courses of action that lead to equality between women and men. The Foundation's work has focused on the inclusion of civil society, with a particular emphasis on women, in systems of governance and political processes. This has been most



visibly demonstrated in consultations with and, in some cases, the participation of civil society representatives in Commonwealth ministerial and other meetings.

Through the Foundation's support and funding of Commonwealth associations and CSO representatives, Commonwealth civil society is playing an increasing role in consultative processes at global and regional levels, promoting participatory approaches to development.

Civil society's contribution to the 2002, 2003 and 2004 Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meetings, for example, has shown the ability of CSOs to dialogue on an equal plane with Ministers on matters of international finance.

At these meetings, civil society representatives raised several concerns including the need for a broader definition of poverty, debt cancellation, aid and mobilisation of domestic resources, fair trade, global economic governance and HIV/AIDS. They also raised concern over the lack of civil society representation in national and global economic governance.

The CSOs have also welcomed government efforts to develop gender-responsive national budgets.

In 2003, the Foundation commissioned 10 case studies on the

provision of essential services throughout the Commonwealth, recognising that when the provision of these services is privatised, especially in the education and health sectors, reduced access to those services disproportionately affects women.

Also in 2003, Commonwealth Education Ministers were presented with briefing papers prepared by civil society (supported by the Foundation) advocating for education to be 'at the heart of the Commonwealth' and highlighting educational concerns in the Commonwealth, in particular the out-migration, or 'brain drain', of teachers from developing countries.

Civil society has also been present at the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting to campaign for a rights-based approach to development and contributed to discussions on maternal health at the Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting in 2004, emphasising the importance of maternal health in order to improve public health.

Civil society representatives at the 7th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (7WAMM) in Fiji Islands in 2004 articulated their concern that the framework for the Commonwealth's work on gender equality over the next 10 years should be consistently measured against

international human rights standards (in particular, CEDAW), and emphasised the importance of including men and boys in development strategies to achieve equality and justice for women.

The Fiji Islands meeting marked a big step forward for civil society participation at a Commonwealth ministerial meeting. Civil society representatives were given speaking rights in plenary sessions with Ministers and opportunities to present outcomes of their own meetings. They also participated fully in working groups with Ministers and senior officials.

The meeting was held to discuss the Commonwealth PoA for Gender Equality 2005–2015 and its theme underlined the need for partnerships to achieve the PoA's objectives. The concept of partnership, the participants noted, especially between government and non-governmental organisations, was integral to the achievement of the goals Commonwealth partners have set themselves (see Box 3.1 on Page 29).

This meeting set a precedent for government–civil society engagement in future Commonwealth ministerial meetings and helped build the momentum from all stakeholders to carry forward the PoA. As with all ministerial meetings, the opportunities provided for civil society at 7WAMM enabled CSO representatives to network with each

other and with government officials.

While the presence of civil society representatives at Commonwealth ministerial meetings is becoming increasingly accepted, and their contributions valued, the Foundation works to create even more and better opportunities for dialogue between governments and civil society representatives and to increase their capacity to contribute meaningfully to discussions.

## Civil Society and Heads of Government

**The reality is that women still have little opportunity to participate in decision-making processes at all levels of society.**

– Tongan female senior government official

As part of the biennial Commonwealth People's Forum, the Foundation convened a civil society meeting in the wings of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2003. Over 45 countries, represented by more than 100 civil society representatives, discussed how civil society's contribution to development

and democracy could be maximised.

In their communiqué to CHOGM, the civil society representatives observed, among other things, that 'contributions by women to the enhancement of their society are not appreciated equally by existing systems and practices which often exclude women from governance and social development.' They went on to urge governments to 'ensure that gender equality is at the centre of programmes and policies of government, that women's human rights are protected and participation in decision-making is achieved at all levels.'

## Citizens and Governance

**Women saw themselves as existing outside the mainstream of society through oppression or discrimination ... they wanted to be inside ... to influence its values and its norms.<sup>1</sup>**

Drawing on 20 action-learning projects implemented across the Commonwealth, the Foundation's Citizens and Governance Programme has explored the concept and practice of 'good governance'. Participants in the programme have concluded that inclusive governance requires all sections of society to have access to and be involved in its policy and decision-making processes: excluding women from these processes undermines the requirements for good governance. The Foundation's *Citizens and Governance Toolkit* provides guidance for practitioners, CSOs and other sectors, for good governance and examples of best practice.

Between October 2002 and August 2003, the Foundation also organised 10 dialogues involving over 250 participants from 20 countries to discuss partnerships between government, the private sector and civil society for development and democracy. Through the Kampala Vision<sup>2</sup>, participants articulated their concern over unilateral decision-making and advocated multi-sectoral partnerships as the key to effective policy-making, good governance and

*The Foundation places particular emphasis on capacity-building and small enterprise development skills*





participation. Such partnerships, they said, should be committed to gender equality and should recognise the value of devolution of power at all levels.

In one project funded by the Foundation, three women lawyers from East Africa went on a study visit to work with UK-based NGOs to gain an insight into the workings of international NGOs and the nature of NGO networks. The women were able to meet and network with professionals in the international development community. It provided them with the opportunity to deepen their expertise in working with and for NGOs.

## Human Rights

The Foundation emphasises the role of civil society in monitoring and upholding human rights, including women's rights. With its support, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) held a capacity-building workshop for West African human rights commissions and NGOs to explore and strengthen this role.

Two of the most recent of the annual Foundation-run Commonwealth Lectures have focused on the issue of human rights. Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in her 2002 lecture on Human Rights in the Shadow of September 11, highlighted the crucial role that NGOs play in reminding governments of their duty to protect human rights in the face of terrorism. In 2001, the Foundation's then chairperson, Graça Machel, urged the Commonwealth to regard 'women's rights as human rights,' and questioned whether these rights could be brought about by legislative change alone. 'True social justice requires a change in what is considered acceptable behaviour toward women and between women and men,' she said. 'Dealing with the pervasive violations of women's rights requires that we break the mould in our thinking and our actions.'

In 2002 an international seminar for women broadcasters was held where participants, funded by the Foundation, learned about the role of the media in women's human rights and development. A participant from Fiji TV noted: 'Discussions included how we as women

## The CSO View

### Box 3.1: Working Together for the Future

CSOs would like to work even closer with governments for continued progress on gender equality issues. Participants at the Civil Society Preparatory Meeting for 7WAMM made the following recommendations for a future working partnership:

- Women's CSOs should continue to advocate women's empowerment even where national gender policies or affirmative action are in place – this will supplement government action;
- CSOs should be aware of government priority development areas when they package proposals for support;
- Work on CEDAW should not be done in isolation from other women's development programmes;
- Women's CSOs should seek opportunities to advance women's and children's interests when legislation is introduced in parliament;
- It is essential to strengthen the information base for decision-making and improve the capacity of the government and its development partners to identify gender-specific constraints and develop appropriate responses;
- Within the Commonwealth there are many possibilities for building partnerships between civil society and parliamentarians, local government associations, business and labour organisations, and professional associations;
- Gender indicators for projecting potential differential impacts of trading activities on the quality of life of women and men, or measuring real benefits to specific social groups should be developed;
- CSOs working on gender should identify new political spaces, and foster new strategic partnerships and coalitions in order to broaden the debate on gender, poverty eradication and women's economic empowerment.

broadcasters could help advance the status of women worldwide. I found that, although Fiji Islands is insulated by geography, our problems are the same as those in hugely populous countries.' Other participants identified the value of the international support network that is established as part of these meetings.

## Peace-Building

Grants given to CSOs demonstrate the Foundation's belief in the important role women play in building peace. Recent grants include the support of women participants from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the South Asia Regional Consultation on UN Security Council Resolution 1325: Women, Peace and Security in South Asia organised by International Alert. Recommendations were made to governments and policy-making bodies on the implementation of the Resolution.

The Foundation also supported the involvement of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum (Nigeria) in a seminar to consider multi-faith approaches to peace-building in areas of social discontent, where violence is expressed through religious fundamentalism. As part of its Special Fund for countries undergoing or recovering from conflict, the Foundation has supported the strengthening of the

civil society networks in Sierra Leone.

## Training and Capacity Building

The 1995 Commonwealth PoA on Gender and Development reiterated the importance of encouraging vocational skills to ensure women's equal access to employment. The Foundation's grant-giving role has placed particular emphasis on capacity-building and small enterprise development skills. Projects sponsored have included the participation of women from Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Namibia and Sri Lanka in International Centre for Entrepreneurship and Career Development courses, and exploring the important role of business development services and micro-enterprises for women in poverty eradication. Members of the Self-Employed Women's Association in India visited the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh to learn about the importance of micro-credit and community development.

The Foundation has also supported the participation of young female professionals in conferences throughout the Commonwealth, enabling the exchange of information and best practice. For example, the Foundation provides special travel grants to enable

women broadcasting executives to attend meetings; this has also supported the exposure of young editors from around the Commonwealth. Participants in such programmes make and sustain valuable networks across the Commonwealth.

In another example, the Foundation funded two young women parasitologists from Papua New Guinea to participate in an international congress on parasitology in Vancouver to share their work on malaria in their country.

The Foundation has funded Commonwealth Trade Union Council<sup>3</sup> efforts to support the role of women in the workplace, especially where they are susceptible to exploitation. A project with women in Bangladesh resulted in more women elected to executive positions; women's concerns reflected in the bargaining agenda; increased awareness by men of the contribution women can make to building strong trade unions; and increased women's confidence through participation in project activities.

## Emerging Issues

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, and especially the growing rate of infections among women, was identified as one of the major emerging issues for the Commonwealth in 2000. The Foundation believes that only through co-operation, mutual learning and sharing can HIV/AIDS be tackled and has responded in many ways, including supporting exchange programmes, capacity building of organisations working in reproductive health, training of health professionals, and supporting youth education.

In 2001, the Foundation sponsored a study visit for a group of young NGO leaders from around the Commonwealth to Lusaka, Zambia. Visitors learned how Zambia has taken a lead in attempting to 'break the silence' surrounding HIV/AIDS and problems it generates in a multi-

sectoral approach. Participants learned how community drama groups were tackling the issue, how 'youth-friendly' clinics worked, and were shown the counselling services offered to clients. Other projects supported by the Foundation have included an education programme on sex workers in India, a prevention of parent-to-child transmission training programme in Uganda, a youth seminar in Malaysia, and an international congress on HIV/AIDS in Australia.

The Foundation is a member of the Commonwealth Joint Action Committee on HIV/AIDS (together with the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Business Council). It is the main donor for Commonwealth Action on HIV/AIDS – Para 55, a pan-Commonwealth coalition of associations advocating more action in the Commonwealth to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Foundation organised and funded the first Commonwealth Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS – Para 55.

## Looking Ahead

The Commonwealth Foundation is committed to its role in the implementation of the 2005–2015 Commonwealth PoA for Gender Equality. The PoA dovetails with the Foundation's own Framework of Action (put together in consultation with civil society representatives at the Commonwealth People's Forum in Abuja 2003) which aims to maximise the contribution of civil society to development and democracy. The Framework consists of six main themes:

- Recognising the importance and contribution of civil society to development and democracy;
- Creating an enabling environment for CSOs to operate;
- Strengthening the civil society sector at

technical and institutional capacity level; and strengthening the role and capacity of networks at national and regional levels and across the Commonwealth;

- Building CSO partnerships with governments, academia, research organisations and other professional groups, donors, the private sector, the media and others;
- Mainstreaming citizen participation in governance at all levels; and
- Facilitating civil society contribution to the achievement of Commonwealth values and programme priorities.

The Foundation is thus placed to implement Commonwealth priorities of advocacy and networking at national, regional and global levels. The Framework provides a base for Foundation action to strengthen civil society organisations as they engage with the Commonwealth and with governments to implement the 2005–2015 Commonwealth PoA for Gender Equality.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> This quotation is taken from B. Knight, H. Chigudu, and R. Tandon, *Reviving Democracy. Citizens at the Heart of Governance*, Commonwealth Foundation (2002).

<sup>2</sup> *Multi-sectoral Partnerships for Development and Democracy: The Kampala Vision*, Commonwealth Foundation (2003).

<sup>3</sup> The Commonwealth Trade Union Council ceased to function in 2004.