Challenges and opportunities for local government in the Commonwealth

Promoting democratic local governance

Many Commonwealth countries – for example, Belize, Ghana, India, New Zealand, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda – have fully democratic and highly decentralised systems of governance. Others, however, including the United Kingdom, remain highly centralised. Many modern local administrations were only established as fully functioning electoral structures in the last 10–20 years, following the end of the Cold War and the emergence of multi-party, pluralistic structures. Thus Lesotho had its first local elections only in 2005 and the Maldives as recently as 2011.

There are, however, some countries that have no provision for elections at local community level, despite having democratic parliamentary systems at national and state level.

The process of decentralisation can also be reversed altogether, as occurred in some countries immediately after independence, when national governments decided to centralise powers and financial control and abolish local elected structures. For some countries, such as Barbados, this remains the case, but this is the exception to the rule.

There are also recent instances, such as Pakistan, which dissolved elected local councils in 2008, where despite the constitutional requirement to do so, the provincial governments have not yet held local elections. In Nigeria, too, despite similar constitutional requirement to hold local elections, not all state governments have done so.

Even in well-established democracies with three tiers of government, there can be tensions or at best confusion over the mandate and responsibilities of local government.

Establishing truly local participatory and democratic governance is therefore a core challenge for the 21st century, as well as a process that is still evolving in many Commonwealth countries and indeed elsewhere, especially in newly emerging democracies.

Of course, local elections are only a first step in achieving democratic governance. Local democracy is not just about elections. To be democratic, local government must be fully accountable, open to scrutiny, especially in its financial dealings, transparent, and must have the engagement and participation of its citizens at its heart – all issues highlighted in the 2005 Commonwealth Aberdeen Principles on Good Practice for Local Democracy and Good Governance.

The Aberdeen Principles also emphasise the need for an inclusive approach to local decision-making that addresses the needs of all in the community – women, the young, the old, and the poor and disadvantaged, including religious minority groups and immigrants – even if they do not have a formal vote. There are some good examples of this in the Commonwealth: as a result of legislation, in India more than 33 per cent of all elected councillors are women.

Contrast this figure with neighbouring Sri Lanka, where there is no such legislation, and where just two per cent of councillors are women.

Commonwealth member countries have agreed core political values on democratic governance and the Commonwealth has a strong mechanism – the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) of foreign ministers – that can address specific problem countries. As these core political values, enshrined in the 2009 Trinidad Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles, include the Aberdeen Principles, countries can be assessed on how well they abide by these principles. For example, whether they are holding regular local elections, have good intergovernmental relations, or ensure proper systems of accountability, transparency and citizen engagement for local government. The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) has in close co-operation with its members undertaken such formal assessments in a number of countries, including in Tanzania and Uganda.

One of CLGF’s core objectives is the promotion of local democracy and good governance. As a Commonwealth Associated Organisation, it is officially accredited at Ministerial and Heads of Government meetings and is able to monitor countries’ compliance with the Aberdeen Principles and draw the attention of CMAG where there are particular problems as well as observing local government elections. CLGF also provides technical support to build and
strengthen local democratic structures so that local governments can better meet the needs of their communities.

Provision of effective local services
Democratic local government provides a real opportunity for local people to have a direct say in decision-making on the policies and services affecting their quality of life – including many of the basic services, such as health, water, sanitation, housing and education, which are fundamental to the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Local government is therefore central to the successful achievement of the MDGs, as was highlighted at the UN Global Forum on Local Development held in Kampala, Uganda, in 2010 and many other international events. This has been recognised by the many international development agencies that are devoting significant resources in helping to build local government services and structures.

Local government and its elected leaders face many challenges to deliver services effectively to all the two billion citizens of the Commonwealth. Demographic pressures especially in rapidly growing urban centres and mega-cities, together with factors such as large-scale in-migration or onset of natural disasters, compound the pressure on local government to deliver efficient services.

The 2010 ComHabitat report Urban Challenges: Scoping the State of the Commonwealth’s Cities, to which CLGF contributed, notes that the Commonwealth’s urban population is growing by 65,000 people a day – over 23.5 million a year – fuelled by rural-urban migration and a redefinition of the boundaries of urban areas. Some small island states in particular have been facing staggering scales of urban growth since 2000: projected to be over 200 per cent in the Maldives, 180 per cent in the Solomon Islands and 175 per cent in Vanuatu by 2025.

Local leaders are furthermore addressing the impact of climate change to ensure that local government delivers development in a sustainable way. Cities especially contribute most quantitatively to CO2 emissions, but can actually be more energy efficient than other forms of settlement if well planned. In many countries, urban infrastructure is in need of renewal, yet is often neglected in favour of rural vote-winning schemes.

Promoting democratic local government
The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) is the organisation in the Commonwealth family that represents local government. It ensures that local government’s voice is represented at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and other key Commonwealth and international meetings.

Its mission is ‘to promote and strengthen effective democratic local government throughout the Commonwealth and to encourage the exchange of good practice in local government structures and services’.

CLGF promotes local government as an important part of government, and supports knowledge-sharing of innovation and good practice through its networks, capacity-building programmes and events.

In its work, CLGF co-operates closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat – in particular the Governance and Institutional Development Division (GIDD) and the Political Affairs Division (PAD) – and other partners such as the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to support democratic governance and developmental objectives in line with the political mandates provided by Heads of Government.
Many of CLGF’s programmes have helped local governments build their capacity to deliver services, by strengthening institutions and processes through councillor and staff training and technical support. For example, the CLGF Pacific Regional Capacity Building Programme, supported by Australia and New Zealand, has provided training in financial management and city planning to help meet the challenges of city management at a time of rapid urbanisation.

The global financial crisis of 2007/8 has also hit local government in developed as well as developing countries, resulting in significant cuts to public spending. Local government has frequently taken the brunt of public expenditure cuts and the imposed austerity measures aimed at reducing national fiscal deficits.

Local governments have therefore been looking for solutions to these challenges around reducing expenditures by, for example, combining local services or merging council administrations. CLGF’s network has enabled many councils to share their experiences and solutions to learn from each other to plan through these difficult times.

Ensuring sustainable and developmental local government

Despite these challenges, local government is best placed to assess the needs and opportunities for their area and their citizens; to help improve living conditions, reduce poverty and promote participatory democracy. Local councils can meet these challenges by working together with local citizens, communities and businesses to adopt a developmental approach. Indeed, local government should be the epicentre for development.

There are many good examples of how Commonwealth countries are beginning to recognise this important role for local government. In the Caribbean, for example, local municipalities and around 500 small and medium-sized industries are set to benefit from a new C$23 million project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). This is being implemented by a partnership of CLGF with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to help local Caribbean municipalities build and strengthen their local economies, as well as to establish business environments that support small and medium-sized enterprises.

Countries such as South Africa are also showing the way in the promotion of local economic development by local government. This involves a proactive relationship with the private sector and, in some cases, civil society organisations.

The role of local government, working closely with the private sector, in promoting local investment and economic growth was recognised in the CLGF Cardiff Consensus for Local Economic Development, endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their 2011 Meeting in Perth, Australia. The recommendations are now being actively taken up and applied by CLGF members in many Commonwealth countries. In addition, CLGF has set up a special task force to share experiences and promote good practices in this area.

In May 2013, CLGF will hold its seventh Commonwealth Local Government Conference in Kampala. It will have the theme ‘Developmental Local Government: Putting local government at the heart of development’, and will bring together local and central government leaders, the private sector, academic partners and development agencies to discuss the developmental role of local government and its relevance to the Global Development Agenda 2015. Its outcomes will not only inform CLGF members, but also include, it is hoped, concrete recommendations to be put to the meetings of the UN General Assembly and Commonwealth Heads of Government later in 2013.

Carl Wright has been the head of CLGF since it was founded in 1994/5. He was previously Assistant Director at the Commonwealth Secretariat (1988–94) where he dealt with Commonwealth programmes for South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique. From 1980–88, he was the founding Director of the Commonwealth Trade Union Council and campaigned for human and labour rights; he previously worked as Secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (1974–80) and was one of the first UK nationals in the European Commission. He has been an election observer in Ghana, Nigeria and Pakistan.