

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF)

Strengthening local democratic government to deliver development

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Local 'just and honest government'

In his address to delegates at CLGF's 2011 conference in Cardiff, Wales, the Commonwealth Secretary-General H.E. Kamalesh Sharma highlighted the fact that the Commonwealth prizes local democracy: 'Our lives are lived locally, our governments are experienced locally. For most people, local government is their first and perhaps only contact with the authorities in their country.'

It is increasingly being recognised that sustainable development cannot be done by national or state/provincial governments alone, and that local authorities are best placed to help improve living conditions, reduce poverty and promote participatory democracy. With rapid urbanisation, the global financial crisis, and the growing impact of migration and climate change, local government's role as the sphere of government closest to the people with responsibility for delivery of essential services is increasingly important. Many national governments are acknowledging this and are moving towards a more decentralised and localised approach to development to ensure that services and development are provided where and when they are needed.

Democratic local government – run justly and honestly – provides the best opportunity for local people to play a role in decision-making that affects their quality of life, including many of the basic services such as health, water, sanitation, housing and education. These are exactly the areas in which CLGF needs to ensure progress if it is to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and improve the quality of life for the two billion citizens of the Commonwealth. Indeed, the role of local government was identified as central to the successful achievement of the MDGs at the 2010 UN Global Forum in Kampala, Uganda.

Giving voice to local democracy in the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) was set up in 1995 in response to the need for a collective voice for local government in the Commonwealth to press for greater decentralisation and democracy where it does not exist. It fosters improving democracy at the local level to enable local councils to deliver better services to improve the quality of life of their citizens.

CLGF has a small secretariat based in London, and offices in Southern Africa, India and the Pacific. It has members throughout the Commonwealth, creating a diverse membership network that uniquely brings together central and local government, as well as an associate network of professional research and training organisations with an interest in this area. These members provide a strong network of political and practitioner expertise and skills that CLGF can draw on in its work and programmes.

As the local government arm of the Commonwealth, CLGF is recognised as a Designated Associated Organisation, with direct accreditation to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). CLGF has taken the lead in encouraging and developing democracy and good governance at the local level, working closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat and with key international partners, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN-Habitat and national governments.

CLGF's work falls into three main categories:

1. Promotion and advocacy of local democracy and good governance.
2. Capacity-building and technical support.
3. Knowledge-sharing and exchange of experience through its network of members.

Supporting local democracy

CLGF actively promotes and advocates for democratic, elected local government throughout the Commonwealth, and works to improve local government structures and services, particularly in countries where local democracy is under threat or where local government and elected structures are just beginning to emerge. CLGF has been present at and has assessed the outcomes of local elections in these countries in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat, the most recent being in Maldives, which held its first democratic local elections in February 2011.

CLGF is often called upon to provide support for national and local governments on issues of decentralisation and local governance. It works with its members and partner organisations to strengthen local democracy and good governance in line with the principles of the Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth principles on Good Practice for Local Democracy and Good Governance. These principles

were developed at the 2005 conference in Aberdeen, Scotland, and adopted by its members. They were subsequently endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government and incorporated into the core political Commonwealth principles at the 2009 CHOGM in Trinidad and Tobago.

The 12 core principles for good practice in local democracy outlined in the Aberdeen Agenda are:

1. Constitutional and legal recognition for local democracy.
2. The ability to elect local representatives in conditions of political freedom.
3. Partnerships between spheres of government.
4. Legislative framework to ensure local government has the appropriate powers in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.
5. The opportunity to participate in local decision-making.
6. Open local government – accountability to the community.
7. Open local government – transparency of decision-making.
8. Openness to scrutiny.
9. Inclusiveness to reflect social, economic, environmental and cultural needs of the whole community.
10. Adequate and equitable resource allocation.
11. Equitable service delivery.
12. Building strong local democracy and good governance.

These 12 principles provide a useful benchmark for reviewing local democracy. Using these principles, CLGF has piloted a process to develop a practical tool for its members to assess the health of local democracy in their respective countries; this is now being adapted for use in other countries.

One of the keys to CLGF's success is its ability to facilitate central–local dialogue by bringing together as members both central and local government. This is vital to ensure the success of decentralisation, to ensure that local governments receive the support and resources they need, and to ensure that the Aberdeen principles for local democracy are followed.

Capacity-building support for local governments

CLGF provides technical support to its members through donor-funded programmes and projects at a national, regional or pan-Commonwealth level. Policy direction is provided by recommendations and outcomes of CLGF policy events, as well as via direct consultation with members and stakeholders. Initiatives are designed to strengthen local democratic structures, improve governance arrangements and to facilitate better service delivery, in

order to contribute towards the achievement of global poverty-reduction targets, including the MDGs.

CLGF promotes practitioner to practitioner learning and skills exchange, and seeks to build strong national and regional networks of local government, including supporting the establishment and strengthening of local government associations. Capacity-building activities target local elected members, council staff and officials in state/provincial or national government, and involve both North-South and South-South partnerships.

CLGF has a regional programme of work under way in the Pacific to support and strengthen local government across the region, and is working with a range of stakeholders in Southern Africa, Eastern Africa and the Caribbean to initiate a similar programme of regional collaboration.

CLGF has been supporting its members to help them assess their performance on effective delivery of services to the local community. As a result, it has pioneered local government peer reviews in Southern Africa and developed training modules for local democracy and good government in South Asia.

Knowledge-sharing and policy development

CLGF believes that sharing experience, skills and ideas nationally and internationally is of great benefit to those working in local government, and the Commonwealth offers a vast array of experience, expertise and good practice in decentralisation and local government. Learning from the past experiences of others, from innovations in policy and service delivery, and from models of good practice is vital if local governments are to meet the global challenges and the needs of their citizens.

CLGF seeks to draw out case studies of good practice and identify expertise and knowledge that can be shared to support learning and strengthen systems and practice more effectively. It publishes a *Commonwealth e-Journal of Local Governance*, a forum for in-depth discussion of issues and trends, and the biennial *Commonwealth Local Government Handbook*, which provides a comparative summary of local government systems and structures in all Commonwealth countries. It also sends out a monthly newsletter – *CLGF e-news* – which keeps members and other partners abreast of CLGF activities and the latest developments in local government across the Commonwealth.

Its network of associate members, many of whom are leading institutions in local government thinking, are important in making a valuable contribution to its policy debates. Areas where CLGF has commissioned research and led policy discussion and events include local government finance, inclusiveness, gender equality and local economic development.

In addition to national/regional policy events that focus on working with members on a specific theme, CLGF organises

a pan-Commonwealth conference that takes place every two years. This event is a major item on the local government calendar and brings together local government, central government, research/academic organisations, development partners, the private sector and civil society around a theme of common interest. The resulting recommendations help to shape CLGF's policy-making, and outcomes are regularly incorporated into CLGF's work plan. The next major conference will be in Kampala in 2013, and will focus on how democracy and development at the local level can help transform communities.

Local economic development (LED) was the focus of discussions at the 2011 Commonwealth Local Government Conference in Cardiff. The outcome – the Cardiff Consensus for Local Economic Development – calls for a strengthening of local government's role in LED, and recommends actions by national and local governments and their partners to achieve this. It has already helped shape a number of national plans on local economic development and will form the basis of CLGF's follow-up work in this area. It was presented to Commonwealth Heads of Government for endorsement at their meeting in Perth in 2011.

Strategic partnership across the Commonwealth

CLGF works closely with the various divisions of the Commonwealth Secretariat, including the Governance and Institutional Development, Political Affairs, and Economic Affairs divisions, and this co-operation and co-ordination is perpetually growing.

The core advantage of the Commonwealth is in its shared political and democratic values. CLGF, which itself undertook a strategic review in 2009–10, welcomed the decision of the 2009 CHOGM to establish the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) to review the work of the Commonwealth. This has provided a great opportunity for the Commonwealth to re-examine its focus and look ahead to the needs of member countries and how it can work more closely and effectively with strategic partners such as CLGF. CLGF's own review recommended that it develop a more formal strategic partnership to ensure that resources are used most effectively, to ensure co-ordination and avoid duplication.

The Commonwealth Ministers Action Group (CMAG) has been successful in identifying problems in terms of democracy and human rights at national level. CLGF would like to see this role strengthened to include local democracy more strongly and, in particular, to make full use of the CLGF's Aberdeen Principles, so that it can take action when they are under threat – as in some countries where elected local government has been postponed in favour of appointed local government. CLGF could play an active part in the reporting process and in supporting member states with implementation.

Commonwealth Heads of Government have a great opportunity to confirm the Commonwealth's brand of democracy and development based on CLGF's shared political and democratic principles and to create a solid platform for trade, investment, development and prosperity. CLGF is ready to play its full part in this revitalised Commonwealth and to contribute to the 2011 CHOGM theme of 'Building National Resilience, Building Global Resilience'.