

**REMARKS TO OPENING PLENARY TO THE
COMMONWEALTH PEOPLE'S FORUM
PHIROSHAW CAMAY, CHAIRPERSON
COMMONWEALTH CIVIL SOCIETY ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

Colleagues and Friends,

It is a singular pleasure to greet all of you this morning in Perth and to welcome all of you to this Commonwealth People's Forum hosted by the Commonwealth Foundation.

To our hosts in Perth WACOSS, a special thank you for agreeing to host us. We thank also all the residents of Perth and the people of Australia for having us in your beautiful country. Your efforts are no mean feat. This event has been planned for more than a year now, and we are grateful for the thought and energy that has gone into making it a memorable occasion. To all the countless number of people whom we have not even met but who have assisted in making this event a success, we thank you. And a special and warm round of applause for the countless number of volunteers who have performed various tasks to assist in this event.

We meet in Australia today hosted by WACOSS as a result of a decision made by the Commonwealth Heads to move the location of the 2011 CHOGM from Sri Lanka to Australia.

Within the Commonwealth Foundation and particularly as CSAC we have realised that the type of People's Forum we participated in previously was

not sustainable. In March 2010 CSAC considered and adopted a motion to have larger regional meetings and a smaller People's Forum.

CSAC met again in March 2011 and adopted the theme of **Civil Society as Drivers of Change in a Dynamic Commonwealth**. The sub-themes we settled on after three days of debate were Human Rights, Climate Change and Environment, Culture and Identity, Indigenous Peoples and Communication, Health, Peace and Security, Education Technology and Innovation, Governance and Democracy, Economic Development, Trade and Finance as well as Gender Equality and Women's Rights.

The statement has been developed out of a Commonwealth wide process, which saw the facilitation of six regional consultations in the Caribbean, Central and West Africa, East and Southern Africa, Asia, Europe and the Pacific. These brought together more than 250 civil society representatives between May and June this year. This statement was also informed by submissions from 14 Commonwealth Associations and two National Associations.

It was drafted by a group of nominated civil society leaders who were all involved in the regional consultations, and included representation from the Commonwealth Associations, and our Australian hosts. This statement was developed, focussing on achievable, measurable and targeted recommendations which provide the basis for civil society engagement. It is indicative of contemporary civil society concerns, rather than a comprehensive listing. In the tradition of previous declarations from civil society it highlights critical contextual issues of common interest and high priority to civil society and recommends actions to be taken by Commonwealth Heads of Government, Commonwealth Member States, Commonwealth bodies and civil society itself.

The Assemblies we hold over the next two days remain an opportunity for you to add and re-emphasise views so that the presentations we make to Foreign Ministers is enriched by your input. In the time available, it is not possible to deal with all the proposals, but I wish to highlight some key aspects.

Human Rights

The statement calls on Heads of Government to :

- ♦ *Support the establishment of the office of a Commissioner on Democracy and the Rule of Law as an independent institution, reporting to CMAG;*
- ♦ *Implement a comprehensive engagement plan for that office to include civil society in its process and procedures;*
- ♦ *Ratify and implement all international human rights conventions; to ensure that all persons are respected and protected equally under the law; regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, physical ability, sexually, faith, and ratify all eight core labour standards by 2015 and commit to biennial progress reviews prior to each CHOGM;*
- ♦ *Make protection of Human Rights Defenders across the Commonwealth a priority for the Human Rights Unit, which we recommend be upgraded to a full Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat.*

Peace and Security

The enlarged report on **Civil Paths to Peace** now recognises the role of civil society in building peace and we recommend member states:

- ♦ *develop national action plans*
- ♦ *implement the recommendations and report on progress to CHOGM 2013.*

Education, Technology and Innovation, we ask Heads to:

- ♦ *constitutionally entrench education as a fundamental human right for all Commonwealth people irrespective of gender, ethnicity, faith, sexuality, physical ability or migrant status;*
- ♦ *commit to increased investment in teacher training and continuous professional development; that curricula and delivery are matched to national development priorities.*

Governance and Democracy

- ♦ **We call** *on all Commonwealth Member States that have not already done so to agree to implement Freedom of Information legislation by 2013 as a key development strategy to improve governance, participatory democracy and stamp out corruption;*
- ♦ **We call** *on the Commonwealth Foundation to provide support for civil society, to establish a clear monitoring mechanism that reports prior to each Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting on the state of civil society, as well as progress with implementation of mandates adopted by Heads. Such a mechanism should bring together technical experts from all Commonwealth regions and be well resourced.*

Economic Development and Trade and Finance

We call on Heads of Government to:

- ♦ *Build on the recommendation from the Eminent Persons Group to convene a Commonwealth Ministers of Foreign Trade Meeting and mandate the Commonwealth Secretariat to convene a joint meeting with Commonwealth Ministers of Finance to develop a joint approach to engagement in international trade and finance*

processes underpinned by consultation with civil society and a rights-based approach to economic development;

- ♦ *Build on the work of the Ramphal Commission on Migration, to mandate the Commonwealth Secretariat to provide technical assistance for the analysis of the impact of freer movement of people on sending and receiving countries within the Commonwealth and report to the next CHOGM in 2013;*
- ♦ *Adopt migration strategies which benefit all.*

Climate Change and Environment

We call on Commonwealth Members States to:

- ♦ *Establish an accessible funding mechanism for civil society to support vulnerable communities' initiatives and projects which mitigate and adapt to the immediate environmental threats facing them and enables them to undertake research and exchange information and expertise;*

Gender Equity and Women's Rights

We call on Heads of Government to:

- ♦ *Give priority in national budgets to investment in education, training, skills and business development for women and girls, particularly to tackle poverty, food security and environmental sustainability;*
- ♦ *Enhance the power and presence of the voice of women at all levels of Commonwealth institutions and processes.*
- ♦ *Mandate the Commonwealth Foundation and the Secretariat to work jointly to enhance the capacity of the Commonwealth Gender POA Monitoring Group and to ensure the effective participation of civil society.*

In conclusion, friends, we know we are all facing a world wide recession, economic uncertainty and austerity measures; climate change, the depth and content of which is uncertain; where global peace and security is threatened by nations wanting other sovereign states to bend to their will. We cannot at this historic moment allow any of the forces of evil, brute political power or unbridled financial wealth deter us from our core mission of protecting the weak or caring for the poor. History will judge us harshly, if we do not act bravely and imaginatively over the next two days. We have two days to commit ourselves across 54 nations and a sizable proportion of the world's population, to individually and collectively, commit ourselves to do right and to outwit the forces of darkness which want to engulf us.

Thank you.

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corejhb@mail.ngo.za