

COMMONWEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK (CHRN)

Background Paper for Working Session Five

Background and Concept of CHRN:

The Commonwealth Human Rights Network (CHRN) was set up in 2003 as a joint civil society initiative, established by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), the Association of Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections and the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit. The Secretariat is based at CHRI's headquarters in India.

The objective of CHRN is to enhance the work of civil society groups working for human rights in Commonwealth countries. It provides a forum for articulating and pursuing a broad common human rights theme for the Commonwealth. It aims to enable sharing of information and collaboration between various groups and encourages combined advocacy efforts - for instance regarding monitoring of commitments made by the Commonwealth and member countries.

One of the main strengths of CHRN is in providing information and guidance to increase the use of the Commonwealth as a forum for human rights advocacy. CHRN facilitates and encourages advocacy in the Commonwealth by informing members of upcoming events and opportunities for advocacy by actively engaging with the official Commonwealth, and providing background material in order to assist such advocacy.

CHRN currently works as a mailing system where the Secretariat sends out a number of emails to members every week when such information becomes available. These emails focus on advice for advocacy within the Commonwealth, human rights news from Commonwealth countries, news on events concerning the Commonwealth and other opportunities that may arise, such as the possibility of obtaining grants or scholarships. Members may also write to the Secretariat to pass on their concerns to other members of the network.

Current Status:

The first meeting of the CHRN was held at the first Commonwealth Human Rights Forum, prior to the Nigeria CHOGM in December 2003. While over 200 people attended that Forum, not all became members or had reliable email addresses to maintain membership. Therefore, at the start of 2004, the Network had 110 members.

Since then, the Secretariat has made efforts to expand the number and diversity of membership. Currently, there are 260 active members (emails are sent to 320 email addresses but approximately 60 are unreliable), hailing from 40 Commonwealth countries - and the number is growing with new members joining regularly. Every region of the Commonwealth is represented by at least one member. Members include non-governmental organisations, umbrella groups for NGOs, private individuals with an interest in human rights, human rights commissions, Universities and representatives from the media. The largest number of members hail from Nigeria, where the first meeting for the network was held and therefore where much exposure for the network was possible.

Feedback and Questionnaire Analysis:

Some of the unsolicited feedback received by the Secretariat regarding the Network has included: "Thank you for your consistent updates and reports which is really helpful and gratifying amidst the human rights work we take on daily" (a regional Pacific NGO based in Fiji); "I must commend your effort at keeping members of this network up to date and informed" (a National Human Rights Commission in Africa); and "This is a wonderful initiative and has made such a real difference. Thank you for all your efforts" (NGO worker in India).

To obtain more targeted feedback from members, a questionnaire was recently sent around the Network. Not all members answered the questionnaire so the feedback analysed does not necessarily reflect the opinion of all. When referring to 'members' in this section we are referring to the members who have answered the questionnaire.

In the first question the members were asked if they found the network useful. All members answered yes – except for two who stated 'occasionally' and 'mostly'. The main reason which members gave for finding the network useful was the fact that the network provides information on human rights issues (both with regards negative episodes as well as best practices) around the Commonwealth, keeping them informed of what is going

on related to their work or interests. Information sharing was another major reason for members being positive about the network. Another highly considered item is the information dealing with special events. The network has been described as a resource kit for information and capacity building. Members also appreciated the fact that CHRN gives them the chance to get contacts of other willing members who deal with the same issues or work in similar regions of the Commonwealth.

Most members stated that they use the network's information rather frequently. A few do not use it very often but still used it every now and then. Nobody replied that they never use it.

The items which members find most interesting are training information and information about conferences. Other items of interest are general human rights news updates, specific news on human rights court cases and legislation, and information about the possibility of obtaining funding or scholarships. Some members said they found all items of interest.

As a means of learning how to use the Commonwealth as a forum for human rights advocacy, members emphasised the importance of getting to know about training programmes as well as getting to know when lobbying is possible and being informed about issues worth lobbying about.

Some members share the information they receive from CHRN with other colleagues who are not members. A few members also send their news bulletin to CHRN so that CHRN can share that information with the other members. Most do not yet share information with other CHRN members but a few of those claimed that they will if they feel they have something to share.

Members were split with regards to choosing between the current system of news being sent out when it arrives at the Secretariat and having a weekly bulletin. There were only slightly more members in favour of having a weekly bulletin than members in favour of keeping the current system. The ones in favour of a weekly bulletin thought it might be more manageable for them.

There was also no clear consensus or decision in favour of attachments over links or vice versa. Many also stated that both links and attachments to pass on information were useful - and that the choice between the two depended on the information being sent.

Future Directions:

Members were asked to suggest ideas for making the CHRN more practical and efficient. Many members suggested that the network should evolve from the current emailing system to a more active group. There were suggestions of setting up workshops, funded projects, training programmes etc – either locally or regionally. Other suggestions include the setting up of an online advisory service and training on human rights issues, and the provision of security to human right defenders in different countries by creating an enabling environment not only for security but also for funding in their home country. More than one member also suggested creating sub-regional and national chapters or networks. These could then lead to regional meetings for members.

Another suggestion made by many was to set up an internet forum or chat group where members could actually interact directly without needing the Secretariat as a go-between. A similar idea was that of setting up a system of group emails where one member would automatically send an email to the rest of the network by sending it to a specific address. There was the request for a contact list or database containing contact details of all members /organisations that can be shared with members. There were also suggestions of having a CHRN webpage from where information from could be extracted.

From a logistical point of view, a very small number of members actually thought that too much information was being sent out. One person also suggested having a summary email at the end of each month which would briefly cover the main events.

The stumbling block for many of these proposals are the limitations of financial and human resources. No suggestions were made as to how such ideas could actually come into practice.

Discussion Points:

During the CHRF session on the Network, we hope to explore many of these issues to guide the future development and expansion of the Network. Please do come prepared with your suggestions. Some of the points to consider include:

- How do you want to see the Network develop over the next two years?
- What can you, as a member of the Network, contribute to this development?
- Taking into consideration the limitations of financial and human resources, what practical suggestions do you have improving the Network?
- How can the Network be developed to become a forum for more collaborative advocacy within the Commonwealth?