

COMMONWEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE

PRESS RELEASE

KEY REPORT ON RIGHT TO INFORMATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH TO GO TO COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING

The theme for the three-day biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), in Abuja, Nigeria from 5-8 December is “Democracy and Development: Partnerships for Prosperity and Peace”. In this context, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), an international NGO dedicated to the practical realisation of human rights in the Commonwealth, is lobbying Heads of Government to meaningfully take action to implement the right to information, in recognition of the fact that the right provides the key to unlocking the potential of the democracy and development for the people of the Commonwealth.

The right to information encourages greater participation by the public in their own governance, as it provides a strong tool for ordinary people to scrutinise the actions of their elected representatives. It is also a proven anti-corruption mechanism: in 2003, of the ten countries scoring best in Transparency International’s annual Corruption Perceptions Index, no fewer than nine had effective legislation enabling the public to see government files. In contrast, of the ten countries perceived to be the worst in terms of corruption, not even one had a functioning access to information regime.

On 2 December in Abuja, CHRI will be launching a major publication, *Open Sesame: Looking for the Right to Information in the Commonwealth*. The *Open Sesame* Report contains a grim message for the institutions and member states of the Commonwealth: namely, that despite the right to information being crucial to democracy and development, only 11 of the 54 member states have laws on the books. Even of these, many laws are deficient and/or not fully operationalised. And the official Commonwealth itself does not have a strong record in terms of information disclosure.

In 1999, the Commonwealth did take some action on the issue when Law Ministers endorsed a set of guiding freedom of information principles. More recently, the Commonwealth Secretariat developed a model freedom of information bill to provide guidance to member states. However, despite these small signs of progress, the Commonwealth still has a huge amount of work to do to ensure that the right to information is enjoyed by all people in the Commonwealth.

Recognising this fact, CHRI has provide copies of their Report to all the member states delegations at CHOGM and have highlighted key recommendations, including that the Commonwealth needs to:

- **Call on all member states to introduce liberal access to information legislation.** CHOGM 2003 should declare that the right to access information is *central* to democracy and development and should obligate themselves to adopting laws in conformity with international best practice by the next CHOGM at the latest.
- **Assist member countries to put in place effective access to information regimes.**
- **Itself be a role model of open governance.** Each of the agencies of the Official Commonwealth must put in place a clear policy on disclosure, have mechanisms that facilitate openness and must proactively disseminate information about their governance structure, norms and functioning.
- **Introduce a reporting mechanism to monitor Commonwealth commitments,** including commitments to the entrenchment of the right to information.

It is to be hoped that Heads of Government will draw on the advice and ideas in the Report as they consider the theme of the meet. The need a concrete, practical plan of action to take the issue forward –not just the empty rhetoric that too often characterises such meets.

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