

Vinaka Commonwealth 7WAMM

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Balmy Fiji was the venue for the 7th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers' Meeting (7WAMM) from 30 May – 2 June 2004. Fijian culture and hospitality permeated the whole event, from the décor in the meeting rooms to the handicrafts market that took place in the foyer everyday to the excellent hosting by the Fiji National Council of Women. They have set a very high standard for their colleagues in Uganda to meet at the next Commonwealth Women's Ministers Meeting which will be held in three years time.

7WAMM resulted in a ten year Plan of Action 2005-2015 with four main themes:

- Gender, democracy, peace and conflict
- Gender, human rights and law
- Gender, economic empowerment
- Gender and HIV/AIDS

CIVIL SOCIETY PREPARATORY MEETING

The main event was preceded by a three-day Civil Society Preparatory Meeting, coordinated by the Commonwealth Foundation and the Fiji National Council of Women. Approximately 100 women attended of which two-thirds were from Pacific countries. As could be expected, this was one of the largest ever turn-outs of Pacific peoples at a Commonwealth meeting.

Prior to the preparatory meeting, the Pacific Foundation for the Advancement of Women coordinated a two-day workshop for Indigenous civil society women from the region. As a result, Pacific delegates were very focused on their objectives and had statements prepared on all main themes. Their ancestors must be very proud of them, for they were impressive. In fact, all the women from around the Commonwealth who gathered for the occasion were impressive. The quality of the outcome is a reflection of the quality of the participants.

The meeting was opened on Sunday afternoon by Ratu Epeli Ganilau, the Chair of the Great Council of Chiefs of Fiji. Ratu Ganilau gave an informed and supportive speech calling for the implementation of all existing conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and a rededication to the ideals of gender equality. He concluded with a reassurance on behalf of the Great Council of Chiefs that:

...as an integral member of civil society we believe that the principles of gender equality and inclusion are fundamental building blocks for democracy and peace building and that affording citizens a voice in the political system and a say over decisions that affect their lives is the essence of a human rights approach.

This was quite a significant statement for a Pacific leader to make since the cultural relevance of human rights, let alone gender equality, is widely debated by leaders in the region.

Workshops were held on the four main themes and the outcomes of these workshops were fed into the civil society statement and into the Plan of Action (PoA). This new text became the text that official delegates worked on over the next few days and many suggestions remain in the final text. The preparatory meeting was relatively well-organised, inclusive and provided real opportunities to influence the outcome of 7WAMM. Hopefully, it will serve as a model for future similar civil society gatherings.

Where Civil Society Made a Difference

Generally speaking, civil society representatives increased the references to human rights, such as calling for the PoA to be cast in a human rights framework; for rights-based approaches to citizenship education including in curricula; and for HIV/AIDS to be viewed from a rights perspective.

Much discussion took place on the failure of Commonwealth countries to achieve the target of a minimum of 30% representation of women in decision-making by 2005. A civil society statement calling for governments to report on progress and process at each CHOGM did not make it into the final text; however there is acknowledgment that institutional capacity needs to be strengthened for the purpose of achieving this target by 2015.

Recognising the important role played by women in preventing conflict, not just resolving conflict, was acknowledged in an effort to ensure that women and Women's Ministries are integrated into relevant government strategies. Governments have been charged with promoting the implementation and monitoring of Security Council Resolution 1325.

Other points include:

- Renewed emphasis was placed on the role of men and boys in achieving the equality of women and girls in all areas.
- More emphasis was placed on the need to collect and disseminate sex-disaggregated data.
- The role of the media in promoting discriminatory attitudes towards women also drew attention.
- A call for women's representatives to participate in negotiations towards just and fair trading systems was included, in acknowledgement of the different impacts of trade on women and men.
- The need to build capacity in civil society organisations (and some governments) was recognised and affirmed in the text. The need to facilitate civil society participation in partnerships to mainstream gender equality was also highlighted.



Working group session at the civil society meeting.

The Civil Society Statement was presented to the Senior Officials Meeting. The Statement welcomed the human rights approach underpinning the Plan of Action, but called for a holistic framework encompassing human rights norms and standards as provided for in international human rights instruments, particularly CEDAW.

7WAMM

Forty-three Commonwealth governments were represented at 7WAMM, which was chaired by the Fiji Minister of Women's Affairs, Adi Asenaca Caucau. A closed Senior Officials Meeting was held first, followed by the first round of discussions on the draft Plan of Action (PoA). Civil society representatives, who were part of official delegations, were able to observe. Apart from a few exceptions, official representatives were supportive of the text added by civil society and paragraphs were strengthened in many areas.

It was agreed at the opening plenary that civil society observers would be given an opportunity to speak on each topic, that is, one civil society statement could be made after every sixth intervention by delegates. The civil society responses were coordinated through a Linkage Caucus which were held each evening to strategise for the following day.

The second day of 7WAMM included presentations on the main topics, followed by simultaneous discussion groups which civil society observers were invited to join along with Ministers and other delegates. The following session had initially been allocated as a

government-civil society dialogue in the form of a roundtable of equal numbers of civil society representatives and official delegates. Three questions were agreed on at the Linkage Caucus on: partnerships; implementing the PoA; and strengthening relationships between government and civil society.

On the day however, a new agenda advised that the session would take the form of three brief presentations by civil society followed by interventions from official delegates. Civil society representatives were not prepared for this format and were disturbed that the original roundtable had been abandoned. A boycott of the session was fleetingly considered before a discussion took place between civil society representatives, the WAMM Chair and Commonwealth Secretariat staff. Apparently some Ministers (or was it some at the Commonwealth Secretariat?) were concerned that the meeting was being taken over by civil society. A lengthy discussion took place and negotiations continued but the roundtable did not go ahead.

Despite this, strong progress was made and certain areas of the PoA were strengthened by official delegates, including those related to:

- The need for transparency
- Capacity building for Women's Ministries and CSOs
- Strengthening institutional capacity to achieve the minimum 30% target of women in decision making and encouraging countries to strive for a higher target
- Culturally appropriate social safety nets
- Fulfilling the commitment to provide 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) to overseas development assistance
- Debt Initiative for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) impact assessments.

Importantly, almost all human rights references in the document remained intact and there appeared to be consistent support for human rights-based citizenship education.

Monitoring and evaluation of the PoA are to be reported in the Secretary-General's biennial report to CHOGM. The Secretariat is to integrate monitoring of the PoA in its 4-year strategic planning and 2-year operational planning cycles. The impact of promoting equality between men and women will form part of gender audits of the Secretariat's work.

In all, a good result!

A Model for the Future

This was a very good civil society event and by all reports one of the best meetings held in conjunction with a Commonwealth event to date. Certainly, civil society representatives were given the opportunity to engage in a meaningful way and to influence. And their opinions were respected.

Some of the elements of success were:

- Genuine opportunities to feed in to, and therefore feel some *ownership* of, the Plan of Action
- Opportunities to make interventions in the main meeting, that is, to be *heard*
- Joining in with official delegates in discussion groups, to *exchange views and identify commonalities*.

Now that it has been done once, what a great starting point for all future meetings. Keep this up and the Commonwealth will lead best practice in civil society consultation and provide a standard for other regional and international organisations, such as the United Nations, to follow.

Carol Nelson represented the Association of Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections (ACAIS - a co-founder of the Commonwealth Human Rights Network) at the Civil Society Preparatory Meeting and at 7WAMM in Fiji. She would like to say: "Bula vinaka, thank you, to the staff of the Commonwealth Foundation and to those who assisted them in coordinating civil society attendance at the event. Special thanks to Titilia Naitini and the women of the Fiji National Council of Women. Your hard work was rewarded with a 'showpiece' outcome." ■