

Abuja's CHOGM: the word on the street

Compiled from conversations in Abuja

A Maori saying quoted at the Commonwealth People's Forum may be: "The most important thing in the world: it is people, it is people, it is people", but at CHOGM it appears that a more apt description was 'it is government, it is government, it is government'...

The recent rhetoric from the Commonwealth has been that the official and unofficial Commonwealth must work hand-in-hand to achieve their goals, but at CHOGM 2003 it was hard enough for the unofficial Commonwealth to even get information to the official Commonwealth, let alone engage in any mutually-beneficial discussions. Ezra Mbogori of the Commonwealth Foundation's Civil Society Advisory Commission explained the frustration: "There is a huge gap between rhetoric and reality. The Secretariat talks of a desire to help, but we haven't seen it yet. When we really start talking about issues, they are nowhere to be seen."

Frustrations were partly due to the lack of any organised space for interaction between civil society and government. As one source apparently close to Commonwealth Foundation put it to TerraViva, the newspaper of the Commonwealth People's Forum newspaper: "There is a near revolt among civil society leaders. Even the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization have better systems for representation by civil society." What made the disappointment all the more marked was that business leaders were offered an opportunity to meet with Heads of Government – a distinction clearly denied civil society. "We find it bizarre that such a privilege is extended to the business community but not to civil society", said Martin Sime of the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations.

The disappointing lack of space for civil society and government to meet made the system of "pigeon-holes"

whereby accredited civil society organisations could place statements in the official delegations' "pigeon-holes" all the more important. Although this is only open to those organisations already accredited to the Commonwealth Secretariat and involves a process of the papers being checked and agreed to by Secretariat officials before being placed in the pigeon-hole, it remained one of the very few avenues for the civil society's voice to be heard by the Heads of Government. One would hope that no censorship of statements takes place; however when questioned about the checking process, one senior Commonwealth Official openly defended it by saying, "we can't have just *anyone* putting *anything* in the pigeon holes – after all, someone might put something about *Kashmir* in there". Heaven forbid that such an issue of supreme importance to two Commonwealth nations and their people should be raised!

Accreditation was crucial to ensure access to certain venues and while the value of this is recognised, particularly in this security-conscious age, the process of accreditation must be questioned. For many who had filled in their forms and provided all necessary information, their passes came so late that access to crucial venues such as the media centre were effectively barred. Holding discussions with the international media at the Media centre was of particular importance when very few members of the press appeared to have otherwise received information on the "people's" side of CHOGM. Upon meeting one of the Commonwealth NGOs that luckily did get access to the centre, a South African journalist exclaimed "Oh, there are NGOs here! We've been trying to get in touch with civil society here and yet no one at the media centre can put us in touch."

Even for those who could get access to the media centre, using it effectively was at times hampered by bureaucratic red tape. CHRI and the Association for Commonwealth Amnesty International Sections for

instance requested a media conference to highlight the CHRN-an issue that surely would have captured the interest of journalists given the prominence of Zimbabwe's human rights situation. Their efforts to organise this through Commonwealth Officials, however, were delayed at every turn.

One of the advantages of accreditation was the use of a Civil Society Lounge. While the use of computers, a printer and a photocopy machine were welcomed, the choice of venue at a hotel used by few civil society groups was questioned. And as one delegate put it: "Computers that won't read floppy disks, a wait of 3 hours for paper for the printer and 7 staples in the machine... This is what we get for our accreditation?"

Attending the many different events held across the city of Abuja also proved to be difficult. There was the Conference Centre with its media centre, the civil society centre and nearby People's Marketplace, many NGO events held at three different hotels and the civil society lounge in a different one, while government delegations tended to be in two other hotels again. The taxi drivers of Abuja certainly did well out of CHOGM! One of the hotels has apparently been known fondly as the "mothballed" hotel as it had never previously opened, despite being built decades ago. Rumour has it that it was prevented from opening as it is in such close range to the International Conference Centre that a sniper could knock off a VIP from the comfort of their hotel room. It was opened for CHOGM, although guests reported some teething problems like no curtains, showers that offered only water near boiling point and being locked out of their rooms for no known reason. Fortunately no snipers were active.

While access to governments should be as wide as possible, the security risks involved with having so many global leaders together can understandably lead to some wariness. The accreditation process that ensures that only certain organisations have access to

various venues can therefore be seen as an important part of these security concerns. Considering such measures, it was therefore interesting to note the varied approaches to security around the city. At some points the machine guns and searches seemed to be effectively and efficiently deterring any threats, at other times security was laughable.

At the hotel of choice for Heads of Government and their senior entourages, for instance, security was so tight that only cars with security clearances were allowed into the hotel area. For those using taxis this meant a 10 minute walk from the drop off point. This nuisance was however deflected for some delegates by the advantage of entering through a door at the back of the hotel – where there was no check of their pass, no search, and no metal detector. Another People's Forum participant – a woman from the UK – entered the same hotel wearing a pass with from the Youth Forum stating she was a man from Nigeria. So while accreditation may not necessarily have got access to their governments, perhaps all advocates needed to do was change their tactics and track down delegations at the Hotel pool bar. After all, as a speaker at the Commonwealth Human Rights Forum articulated by quoting Gandhi, civil society must take all opportunities and spaces available to "engage where you can and confront where you must"! ■