

My Abuja experience...

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No inter-governmental meeting takes place these days without an accompanying “people’s gathering” and the 2003 CHOGM in Abuja was no exception. Here, Annie Watson, Director of the Commonwealth Trade Union Council and Chair of CHRI’s Trustee Committee, reflects on her ‘Abuja experience’.

My CHOGM experience started when I boarded the flight from London to Abuja on Friday 28 November and met old Commonwealth friends, many visiting Nigeria for the first time. Many of us had already sent our CHOGM messages to be included in the packs for government delegations but there was an air of excitement and anticipation as we hoped that our meetings would also help to influence the decisions taken by Heads of Government.

In Abuja we set about finding the location of the People’s Forum and getting accreditation documents. This proved to be one of the most difficult tasks of the week. For any access other than the People’s Centre – especially to the Media Centre at the CHOGM venue – we needed security passes with photographs. All of us had brought photos, as instructed, but the process to issue the passes was not functioning. I was told I had to go the accreditation centre at the Hilton Hotel and, eventually, after an hour of arguing with officials and my refusal to leave until it had been issued, I got my photo pass. During the next few days, the security pass issue divided the People’s Forum participants into “haves” and “have-nots”. Mystery surrounded the location of the CSO lounge, where there were reputed to be pigeon-holes for each Commonwealth association so that we could receive messages and invitations to functions.

When I studied the programme of meetings at the People’s Forum, I realised that I had come to Abuja for a week but that during that time I wanted to attend three weeks worth of meetings! Some meetings went for 2 or 3 days and every day there were also half-day meetings, lunchtime meetings and evening meetings -

all of them on key issues for civil society activists. Luckily, every evening all of those who organised meetings were invited to give reports to other Forum members.

The first event – on Sunday afternoon - was the official opening by President Obasanjo of the Commonwealth People’s Forum, an event characterised more by the cultural display than the speeches. I was very impressed that the President sat through the whole event – in the UK politicians make their speeches and then leave! The tourism minister invited us to return to Nigeria for relaxation and marry Nigerians to improve international relationships!

On Monday morning it was time for the first session of the Commonwealth Civil Society Meeting on Development and Democracy organised by the Commonwealth Foundation with participants from over 30 countries. Reports from the regional consultations before CHOGM showed that there were several themes that emerged from all corners of the Commonwealth:

- Democracy is about much more than elections: it is about freedom of association, government and administration of justice, accountability and transparency;
- For many people democracy is perceived as having brought a decline in living standards, not development – possibly because it has come to some countries at the same time that the power of states has been reduced because of the international organisations like the IMF, World Bank and WTO;

- The need for civil society organisations (CSOs) – NGOs, churches, trade unions, women’s indigenous and youth organisations, human rights advocates – to work together and have joint campaigns;
- The need for CSOs to run their *own* affairs in a democratic and transparent way;
- The need for governments to listen to and work in partnership with CSOs.

CSOs’ desire to be heard by governments had particular resonance as Commonwealth leaders would be in Abuja within days. We realised there was no space in their programme for any interaction between civil society and governments. Although the Commonwealth Business Council would make a presentation to the CHOGM, there was no provision for similar access for CSOs. Members of the Civil Society Advisory Committee urgently requested that representatives of governments and civil society should meet. They pointed out that the Commonwealth was lagging behind other international institutions like the United Nations and World Bank that have instituted direct links with CSOs. The following day, Terraviva (the daily independent newspaper for the Forum produced by Inter Press Service) reported that civil society had declared war!

On Tuesday afternoon, CHRI launched ‘Open Sesame’ – a submission to the CHOGM highlighting the importance of the Right to Information in the Commonwealth. This meeting, like many others in the People’s Forum, was characterised by high levels of participation, especially by the many Nigerians who welcomed the opportunity to discuss issues of mutual concern with sisters and brothers from around the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth Secretary-General, Don McKinnon, came to the People’s Forum on Wednesday

lunchtime to make a short presentation and answer questions. Access for civil society dominated the meeting – the Secretary-General said it was an issue for the governments. Participants urged him to show leadership and promote dialogue between the CHOGM and civil society. We were still hopeful that something might be organised the following day but this was not to be. Other topics included concerns over Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS and trade. Participants asked why Australia and Britain had not been suspended from the Commonwealth over the invasion and “colonial occupation” of Iraq and the Secretary-General answered that no Commonwealth country had raised the issue.

On Wednesday afternoon, the final statement from the Civil Society Meeting was agreed. We urged that the Commonwealth Secretariat should be given the power to audit the commitments made by Heads of Government and to track progress on good governance, transparency and accountability. We highlighted the threat to human rights from the war against terrorism. We urged countries to be more pro-active on gender issues and to take a lead in fighting for a fairer system of world trade. In an open letter to the CHOGM, over 50 civil society leaders expressed grave concern at the Zimbabwe government’s continued violation of the Harare Declaration through the continuing repression of civil society, the media, human rights defenders and the opposition. We urged the CHOGM to keep up the pressure on Zimbabwe.

On Wednesday evening, representatives of the Commonwealth Youth Forum attended the Forum reports session to present the report on their meeting that had taken place from 25 November. The similarities between their conclusions and those of the Civil Society Meeting were remarkable. The question of access to governments, action on trade, HIV/AIDS and human rights were important issues for young people as well. On Thursday, the CTUC and Nigeria Labour Congress organised a meeting entitled “Trade Union Rights in the Commonwealth: Myth or Reality?” The meeting was

over-subscribed and received excellent television and newspaper coverage. The General Secretary of the Ghana TUC, Kwesi Adu-Amankwah, said that in Ghana the right to organise existed in law but that in practice there were many constraints. Other problems include non-adherence to agreements on severance pay for public servants made redundant and an inadequate Labour Inspectorate. Silam Hassan of the Union of Employees in Construction Industry, Malaysia spoke about non-observance of workers' rights to occupational health and safety and also on maternity conditions. John Odah, General Secretary of the Nigeria Labour Congress, outlined the history of trade union rights in Nigeria under the various military and civilian regimes.

In my presentation, I gave an overview of the trade union rights situation around the Commonwealth. I said that it was a particular issue for the Commonwealth, in which there were many poor countries, because poor people are most vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. I said that the battle to attract foreign investment had led governments to promise not to enforce labour legislation. I said that women were over-represented in badly-paid sectors of the economy, as home-workers, casual and temporary workers. I drew attention to the situation in Zimbabwe, where trade unionists and many civil society activists have been victimised because of their criticism of government. I concluded by saying that trade union rights were not a reality in the Commonwealth and that governments were failing in their duty to protect their citizens from exploitation in the workplace. I said that free trade unions were the best safeguard for workers' rights.

On Thursday afternoon, I attended the concluding session of the Commonwealth Human Rights Forum, which had been attended by 260 participants. In the Communique, the Forum affirmed that the business of the Commonwealth is the realisation of all human

rights for all people. Again the issue of participation in CHOGM was key, with the Communique urging Heads of Government to do more than pay lip service to the desirability of partnership with civil society. The Forum also launched the Commonwealth Human Rights Network, co-ordinated by CHRI, which it is hoped should facilitate greater networking on human rights issues.

On Friday afternoon, I attended a meeting of Sierra Leone NGOs on the topic of the "Transition from War to Peace". It made me think about the enormous contribution of the courageous members of civil society who kept the country going during the years of repression and brutality. The same applied to South African civil society under apartheid, to Nigerian civil society under Abacha and now to Zimbabwe civil society under Mugabe. I thought about how quickly the new leaders forget the people who have fought, often with great personal sacrifice, for the restoration of the rule of law and democracy.

On my journey home on Saturday, I found myself wondering why Commonwealth leaders can't acknowledge the role of civil society by having a dialogue with us during the CHOGM? Why don't they realise that dialogue with the business community alone will not result in solutions to the huge problems of poverty, inequality and injustice in the Commonwealth? We can contribute energy, ideas, enthusiasm and Commonwealth- and country-wide networks of activists. We're a valuable resource waiting to be invited to the table.

We now have to reorganise ourselves to lobby for Malta 2005. We need to think about emulating the business community and organising ourselves into a Commonwealth Civil Society Council. But, first, we need some reflection, rest, relaxation and recharging of batteries after the Abuja experience. The resolutions will come with the New Year!