

# Participation for all?

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**H**uman rights workers live for buzzwords. It's like they speak a language of their own. From 'capacity building' to 'Millennium Development Goals', there's a new phrase adopted every minute and you could fill a dictionary with all their terminology.

One of the most popular buzzwords in the run up to Abuja 2003 was 'participation'. How to ensure that governments allow their citizens to participate in democracy and governance. And how to ensure that the people's voice was heard, and that their message was carried to the Heads of Government and beyond.

As a human rights journalist, I was thrilled at the challenge. Here was our chance to put the People's Forum, and in particular the Commonwealth Human Rights Forum, on the map and into the psyche of all Africans.

It was with some frustration therefore, that I found myself in one class of people for whom 'participation' was easier said than done.

From the start, it was made clear that those journalists without official accreditation would not be welcome. And so the process of form filling, phone calls and waiting began.

The official CHOGM accreditation process eventually resulted in a stand-off: journalists being refused entry to a building to collect their passes because they did not have passes to enter! But at least these CHOGM passes arrived before the event began and the problems were all dealt with professionally.

To this day, I am still waiting for my People's Forum pass to arrive. And I'm not expecting it any day soon, despite filling in all the forms as asked. Twice.

At first it was all a bit of an inconvenient joke, having to phone up every day and ask where our passes were, or

travelling across town to repeat the same question. But when the People's Forum started and my staff were turned away, the laughter quickly evaporated.

If the People's Forum is ever going to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Heads of Government Meeting, it needs to be every bit as professional in its organisation.

The lack of an accurate timetable meant journalists couldn't plan coverage, which resulted in reduced airtime for the organisers. It also meant media couldn't find those events they'd actually managed to hear about.

Organisers cannot afford to deter those journalists who are active in the field of human rights and who are willing to co-operate. In Africa, they face enough problems as it is - from fear of reprisal to lack of adequate funding - without putting any further obstacles or inconveniences in their path.

Personally, I found myself in the situation of trying to persuade a man with a gun that the photocopied sticker I'd been given was as valid as the laminated card they'd given other participants. When he picked a fight, I wasn't going to argue. I simply left.

I had to travel across town every morning to pick up a daily sticker (for what it was worth), thereby increasing my costs and my inconvenience. Again this may seem like a small issue, but if you make it more difficult for journalists to cover events that they see as periphery anyway, then many will not bother. They will just cover the Heads of Government Meeting and go home. And that benefits neither party.