



COMMONWEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE

Human Rights Advocacy in the Commonwealth

A User's Handbook

COMMONWEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, international non-governmental organisation, mandated to ensure the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth. CHRI was founded in 1987 by several Commonwealth professional associations. The objectives of CHRI are to promote awareness of and adherence to the Harare Principles, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other internationally recognised human rights instruments, as well as domestic instruments supporting human rights in Commonwealth member states.

Through its reports and periodic investigations, CHRI continually draws attention to progress and setbacks to human rights in Commonwealth countries. In advocating for approaches and measures to prevent human rights abuses, CHRI addresses the Commonwealth Secretariat, member governments and civil society associations. Through its public education programs, policy dialogues, comparative research, advocacy and networking CHRI's approach throughout is to act as a catalyst around its priority issues. The nature of CHRI's sponsoring organisations - journalists, publishers, broadcasters, lawyers, legal educators, health professionals, and parliamentarians - allows for both a national presence in each country and an international network.

CHRI's headquarters are in New Delhi, India, and has offices in London, UK, and Accra, Ghana.

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2005

Overview and History of the Commonwealth:

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of countries that cooperate in the common interests of their peoples and work together in promoting international understanding and world peace. The head of the Commonwealth is **Queen Elizabeth II**. Although the association originates from the British Commonwealth (which was made up of Britain and her former colonies), the modern Commonwealth of Nations is made up of independent countries.

Member states are scattered all over the globe - in Europe, Africa, Asia, North America, the Caribbean and the South Pacific - with a combined population of around 1.8 billion people. Each of these (with one exception, Mozambique) had earlier been ruled by Britain or linked administratively to another member. Not all former colonies chose to join the Commonwealth at independence - for instance, Myanmar (independent since 1947) chose not to join and Ireland withdrew in 1949. Others, like Cameroon and the Maldives, waited some

years after independence before joining; and others left and rejoined (South Africa and the Fiji Islands). Some countries have been suspended (for example Pakistan was suspended in 1999 and readmitted in 2004) - and in December 2003 Zimbabwe withdrew from the Commonwealth, although many Zimbabwean citizens still feel part of the Commonwealth and do not agree with the government's decision.

The 53 member states are:

Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, the Bahamas, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Brunei Darussalam, Cameroon, Canada, Cyprus, Dominica, Fiji, The Gambia, Ghana, Grenada, Guyana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Kiribati, Lesotho, Malawi, Malaysia, the Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nauru, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, the Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Kingdom, Vanuatu and Zambia.

The workings of the Commonwealth can be divided into two different areas:

- ▶ The official Commonwealth - made up of the intergovernmental meetings and the official agencies (the Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth of Learning); and
- ▶ The unofficial or people's Commonwealth - made up of civil society.

Why use the Commonwealth for Human Rights Advocacy:

- ▶ Human rights are a key area of concern for the Commonwealth - as shown by the 1991 Harare Declaration in which the Heads of Government "pledged to work for the protection and promotion of the fundamental political values of the association, namely democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, fundamental human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, and just and honest government". Human rights advocates may be able to influence its work in this area.

- ▶ Most Commonwealth countries share colonial histories and therefore also share similarities in governmental and legal structure which are based on the rule of law. This enables better understanding and easier cooperation for human rights advocacy across jurisdictions. There is also the ability to communicate across jurisdictions in English, no small advantage in the rapidly expanding and inclusive world of instant communications.
- ▶ The commonality of the law provides a similar environment which makes it easier for good practice from one country to be transferred to another - and also facilitates lessons learnt by one country to be adapted to suit the needs of another country.
- ▶ The Commonwealth overlaps other intergovernmental groupings such as the United Nations (UN), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Pacific Islands Forum

(PIF). Members can therefore take messages further through these forums.

- ▶ Although civil society involvement with the Commonwealth has been disappointingly limited in the past, the Commonwealth nowadays allows civil society to knock on various doors at the Secretariat or sometimes to get involved directly with programmes which concern their line of work or interest.
- ▶ The Commonwealth's size and scope offer opportunities for manoeuvrability for both governmental and non-governmental organisations. Within the Commonwealth it is possible for smaller countries to engage meaningfully with larger countries with relative ease.
- ▶ The Commonwealth consists of a third of the world's population with diversity of religion, wealth, culture and geography which makes it a significant forum in which to have your voice heard.
- ▶ Decisions within the Commonwealth are based on consensus by all member states, enabling the Commonwealth to be - theoretically, if not always in practice -

an equal partnership of nations for discussion and decision-making.

- ▶ The many Commonwealth Associations that work to influence and implement the Commonwealth's action provide good partners for solidarity and consensus building.

Past successes for the Commonwealth in the field of human rights include:

South Africa - the Commonwealth played a strong role in the campaign against apartheid. While many other groups were also involved in this campaign, the Commonwealth was a leader - for example, in instigating sanctions for sporting events six months prior to the UN sanctions. The Commonwealth also had an important involvement in the peaceful dismantling of apartheid.

Nigeria - Commonwealth governments and CMAG played a significant role in bringing an end to the military rule. The respectability which Commonwealth membership confers in many people's minds was clear from the way that Nigerians looked for an early return to full membership after suspension.

Official Commonwealth Agencies:

The Commonwealth Secretariat:

The Commonwealth Secretariat was established in 1965 and is the main intergovernmental agency of the Commonwealth. It is located at Marlborough House in London, UK and is headed by the Commonwealth Secretary-General. The mandates for the Secretariat's strategic plan and work programme are decided by the Commonwealth Heads of Government who meet every two years at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM).

The main body responsible for human rights in the Secretariat is the **Human Rights Unit (HRU)**. The HRU is a free-standing unit that reports to the Secretary-General. It works to promote human rights as it has no enforcement or investigative role. Its activities include:

- ▶ Integrating human rights work into all areas of the Secretariat's work.

- ▶ Publishing information on human rights developments, jurisprudence and other human rights related issues for the information and use of member countries - such as the newsletter called the 'Human Rights Update'.
- ▶ Developing programmes related to the promotion and protection of human rights - giving importance to the indivisibility of civil, political, economic and social rights. Projects include developing strategies to combat trafficking of women and children, assisting in the reform of criminal justice systems with particular focus on the rights of victims of crime, and the compilation of case law related to the unconstitutional overthrow of governments.
- ▶ Working on human rights issues with governmental and civil society organisations (CSOs) from Commonwealth and other countries, interacting with the UN human rights system following the signing of a 'Memorandum of Understanding' with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

- ▶ Providing advice to the Secretary-General as needed, including advice on Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) issues (see below for more). Due to the fact that CMAG has the power to suspend members for breaching the Harare Declaration, the involvement of the HRU potentially gives it an important role in the enforcement of human rights and also helps to increase the importance of human rights issues in CMAG's deliberations.

Other divisions of the Commonwealth Secretariat also have programmes that are directly related to human rights. Most notably, the Secretariat does valuable work to strengthen democratic institutions, processes and culture. It observes elections, provides appropriate technical assistance and training, and collaborates with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and other relevant organisations to promote best democratic practice.

The **Good Offices** role of the Secretary-General is important in conflict prevention and resolution, as well as for post-conflict reconstruction and development. Much

importance is given to capacity building to ensure that positive changes are locally sustainable. The Secretary-General's Good Offices have been used to assist the governments of Tonga, Fiji, Guyana and Cameroon.

The **Political Affairs Division (PAD)** assists consultation and consensus-building among Commonwealth governments and monitors international political developments, conducts research and prepares briefings on political issues of interest to member countries. It also provides advice and support to the Secretary-General with regards to his Good Offices role. This makes the PAD a good target for advocacy to raise an issue which you consider requiring the attention of the Secretary-General. The PAD facilitates the CHOGMs as well as the Foreign Ministers Meetings.

The **Deepening Democracy Programme** is designed to implement parts of the Harare Declaration and its activities include workshops on formal democratic processes such as the role of the opposition and election observers. It has also tackled issues such as Gender and Democracy, as well as Democracy and Small States.

The **Gender Programme** promotes gender integration in the Secretariat's work and promotes women's rights. At their 2004 meeting in Fiji, the Ministers responsible for Women's Affairs agreed upon the 2005 - 2015 Gender Plan of Action which will guide the Commonwealth in its third decade of working for the advancement of gender equality.

The **Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC)** is the Secretariat's main way to promote development and the alleviation of poverty in member countries. This is done through the provision of technical assistance from one member country to another - which includes human rights training and advancing democracy in Commonwealth countries by providing specialist advisory services, training, experts and consultants to strengthen democratic institutions. Requests for CFTC assistance must be directed through the designated CFTC point of contact, who is normally in the Planning or Finance Ministry. Requests should include information on the problems being faced, the type of assistance required, a description of the project and the organisation which is to undertake the project. For more information: cftc@commonwealth.int

The **Legal and Constitutional Affairs Division (LCAD)** helps to bring about cooperation on constitutional and administrative law matters amongst member countries. It also helps with the legal aspects of development and administration of justice systems. This cooperation is possible because of the similar legal systems of the Commonwealth member states. The mission statement of the division places much importance on the notion of human rights and the rule of law. This makes the LCAD a good target for advocacy if an organisation is concerned about legal issues in a Commonwealth member state. The Commonwealth Law Ministers' Meetings, which are held every 3 years, are facilitated by the LCAD.

For more information:

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Email: info@commonwealth.int

Webpage: www.thecommonwealth.org

The Commonwealth Foundation:

The Commonwealth Foundation, based in London, UK was founded in 1966 and serves the people's, or unofficial, Commonwealth. It is funded by Commonwealth governments and governed by both governments and civil society representatives. The Foundation's Board of Governors consists mainly of UK-based representatives of member governments together with five representatives of civil society. Its mission is to promote the work of civil society and provide links between the official and the people's Commonwealth - often through civil society consultations, pre-ministerial meetings and providing resources to civil society. The Foundation aims to help civil society to achieve certain Commonwealth goals, particularly those connected to democracy and good governance, respect for human rights and gender equality, poverty eradication and sustainable, people-centred development, and the promotion of culture and diversity.

The Foundation also funds networking, capacity-building, training and information exchange, as well as arts and cultural activities. Some of the programmes funded by the Foundation include the Consultations on Global Priorities and the Role of the

Commonwealth, the Commonwealth People's Report on the Millennium Development Goals, and the Citizens and Governance Programme.

The Commonwealth Foundation came into existence as a result of pressure from civil society and a conference organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society. The Foundation was instrumental in gradually building civil society organisations all over the Commonwealth - in the days before the term 'civil society' had even been coined.

The Civil Society Advisory Committee (CSAC) provides assistance and input to the Foundation's agenda and objectives. Members of the CSAC are chosen from civil society hailing from all regions of the Commonwealth, making the CSAC a good forum for civil society to make changes and prioritise certain issues within the Foundation.

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The Commonwealth of Learning:

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which is based in Vancouver, Canada, is the third part of the official bureaucracy of the Commonwealth. COL is an intergovernmental agency established in 1987 by the Commonwealth Heads of Government and is designed to extend, improve and link distance education facilities in the Commonwealth. One of its main priorities is access to quality education for all - which is a fundamental human right. COL is financially supported by Commonwealth governments on a voluntary basis. For more information: www.col.org.

Commonwealth Meetings:

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM):

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is a Commonwealth summit, held once every two years, where broad policy direction is agreed upon. Each CHOGM has a particular theme that is usually chosen a year in advance. These themes are usually logical outcomes of past CHOGMs. For

example, the 1999 CHOGM focused on globalisation and people-centred development following the focus on global economic issues in 1997. The theme could also reflect current global preoccupations. In 2005, the theme is about networking for development. Host countries have a say in deciding the theme and agenda of the CHOGM, making the host country particularly worth targeting for advocacy in order to get attention for a particular issue. As a result advocacy around the CHOGM must start a long time before the Heads of Government Meeting itself.

As a result of lobbying at the Durban CHOGM by a small group of Commonwealth associations, a paragraph on HIV and AIDS was included in the Communiqué for the first time. Commonwealth Heads agreed to play a leadership role in tackling the pandemic. The paragraph was number 55, and after CHOGM, a group of Commonwealth associations and other CSOs set up the Para 55 Group which aimed to integrate HIV and AIDS into the programmes of as many Commonwealth associations as possible. The HIV and AIDS work of the Secretariat was stepped up as a result of that paragraph.

At the end of each CHOGM, the Heads of Government produce a **statement** or **declaration** relating to the CHOGM theme. The statements and declarations are not enforceable. They are simply statements of the purposes and principles of the Commonwealth. Examples of such declarations are: the 1979 Lusaka Declaration on Racism; the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration; and the 1999 Fancourt Declaration on Globalisation and People-Centred Development. Human rights are generally given a certain importance in these declarations or statements.

The most important declaration for human rights is the 1991 **Harare Declaration**, which updated the Commonwealth values and includes a programme of action that places priority on human rights and strengthening democracy. To be a member of the Commonwealth, countries must abide by the Harare Principles. The Harare Declarations can be found at:
<http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/cwhr/doc/harare.htm>

The lead up to the CHOGM is a good time for advocacy in order to highlight an issue. This could include increasing the attention on:

- ▶ a country-specific issue - such as the plight of Dalits in India; or
- ▶ a cross border issue - such as human trafficking, land mines, or small arms proliferation.

One major factor leading to the Harare Commonwealth Declaration in 1991 was a network of CSOs who lobbied for such a declaration. The result was the most important Commonwealth declaration of its sort to date, as the Heads of Government recognised the fundamental importance of human rights in the Commonwealth. Such pressure by CSOs can affect the final Communiqués at CHOGMs. In Auckland, in 1995, Paragraphs 1 to 5 of the Millbrook Action Programme on the Harare Declaration (which created CMAG) were the result of lobbying by various human rights CSOs, which argued for the Harare Declaration to be more effective. The execution of the activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and the suspension of the Nigerian military dictatorship created a political environment where CSOs could successfully lobby for progress. The Coolum Communiqué in 2002 included paragraphs on subjects which CSOs had been stressing upon: landmines and accession to the International Criminal Court.

To influence the CHOGM discussions and outcomes, submissions and briefing papers can be sent to the Commonwealth desk at the Ministry of Foreign or External Affairs in your home country to be passed on to the government delegation for the CHOGM. As well as highlighting a problem, it may be strategic to include in your submission some recommendations of what should be done to deal with the issues you raise. Meetings could be set up with the Minister for Foreign/External Affairs and his/her contact person on Commonwealth issues. Other focus points for advocacy could be the High Commissions of Commonwealth countries based in your capital city. The political affairs division is usually the best point of contact at the High Commission to talk about your concerns and forward them to government delegations.

CHOGM itself is only attended by the Heads of Government and government officials. However, CSOs can apply to the Civil Society Liaison Officer at the Secretariat for accreditation to the CHOGM once they are 'Accredited to the Commonwealth' (see below for more details). Once accredited, CSOs can provide submissions, access the CSO lounge and attend some functions - but they are still not allowed to attend the

meeting itself. Many CSOs find that they can conduct effective advocacy without being accredited.

The increased media attention around the issues of Commonwealth countries during the CHOGM should be taken advantage of so that your message is not only passed on to the Heads of Government themselves but also to the public in general.

Chair of the Commonwealth:

As of 1999, the Head of Government hosting CHOGM becomes Chair of the Commonwealth for the two-year period following that CHOGM. The purpose of the Chair is to articulate the position of the Commonwealth internationally - to raise its profile and to represent the Commonwealth in difficult diplomatic situations where a Head of Government would carry more weight than the Secretary-General.

The Committee of the Whole:

The Committee of the Whole (CoW) is the name given to the meeting of senior officials who take care of much of the detail covered during the CHOGMs and who draft the CHOGM Communiqué, leaving the Heads

of State to deal with broader policy issues. The CoW meets in London every two years - a couple of months before the CHOGM - and is attended by officials from the London High Commissions of member states. This means that communication between the High Commission staff in London and the Counsellor responsible for Commonwealth Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign / External Affairs in your home country is particularly important as part of wider advocacy strategies within the Commonwealth. A recent initiative is that the day before the CoW, there is a dialogue between civil society organisations and governments, enabling CSOs to influence the agenda and communiqué.

When the Committee of the Whole (CoW) met in 1993, CSOs were chiefly responsible for two paragraphs in the 1993 CoW report on Functional Cooperation: Paragraph 24 on the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Paragraph 27 on CEDAW and the endorsement of the draft UN Declaration on the elimination of violence against women.

CHOGM-related events:

The Meeting of the Heads of Government is not the only event to be held at this time: events for civil society are also held around the same time as the CHOGM. Whilst the Heads of Government usually meet for 3 days, civil society events such as the **Commonwealth Peoples' Forum**, which is organised by the Commonwealth Foundation, usually last for a week - with some days overlapping with the CHOGM itself. The People's Forum is an opportunity for civil society representatives, including those who are accredited to CHOGM, to network and highlight issues. As well as individual exhibition space, there is also communal space and opportunities for presentations and cultural expression. This is a good opportunity to have your views heard by local and international press as well as by the general public.

There are often other events organised by the Commonwealth Foundation. These events are generally the culmination of a series of regional consultations on a particular issue which lead to the preparation of a civil society statement that is formally conveyed to the CHOGM. This statement is one of the only official ways for civil society messages to

be heard by the Heads of Government. In 2003, the topic for the consultations was 'Maximising Civil Society's Contribution to Democracy and Development', which led to a meeting at the CHOGM where a communiqué was drafted. More information: www.commonwealthpeople.com

Also of importance is the **Commonwealth Human Rights Forum** organised by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), which was held for the first time in 2003. It will now become a regular event at CHOGMs - being held again in Malta in 2005. It is an opportunity for civil society groups and National Human Rights Institutions from around the Commonwealth to discuss common issues of concern and to prepare a communiqué that is sent to the Heads of Government. More information: www.humanrightsinitiative.org

A **Youth Forum** and a **Business Forum** are also held just prior to the CHOGM and can be useful in gaining extra focus and publicity for your human rights concerns. You could consider advocating to the organisers for the inclusion of your issue in the agenda, to be a guest speaker at an event, and to make documents on your issue available at the

forum. As well as increasing awareness, knowledge and publicity about your issue, if your concerns become part of these forums they may be included in the communiqués which are presented to CHOGM itself.

Commonwealth Ministerial Meetings:

While CHOGM happens every two years, various ministers from Commonwealth countries meet on a regular basis to discuss areas of concern. Law, Education, Women's Affairs, Youth Affairs and Health Ministers meet every 2 or 3 years, while Finance and Foreign Ministers meet every year. The proceedings of the ministerial meetings will often inform CHOGM deliberations. For example, the proposals for access to information legislation were debated at the 1999 Law Minister's Meeting and adopted at the next CHOGM. The proceedings of ministerial meetings are sometimes also taken by Ministers to other international fora. Opportunities for civil society involvement in the meetings themselves vary, but are generally very limited. Civil society groups may be able to submit a statement and can always lobby individual Ministers and delegates.

Law Ministers:

Relevant Commonwealth associations were accredited to the last few Law Ministers' meetings as well as to the senior officials' meetings that preceded the Ministerial Meetings. These associations often partner with the Commonwealth Secretariat on implementation of ministerial recommendations.

Women's Affairs Ministers:

A few women's organisations are accredited to the Women's Affairs Minister's meetings and certain government delegations even include a civil society representative from that country. A civil society meeting held at the same time as the 2004 Ministerial Meeting in Fiji produced recommendations that were presented to the Ministers and which contributed to the Gender Plan of Action for 2005-15 by the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Plan of Action was the result of two years' consultation with governments, civil society and Commonwealth organisations. These bodies are now working together on its implementation.

Finance Ministers:

The meeting of Finance Ministers is timed to take place immediately before the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. The 2002 Meeting included civil society input for the first time in the form of pre-meeting regional consultations in five Commonwealth countries. These regional consultations fed into one meeting in London and led to a Civil Society Statement on Financing for Development. Civil society held discussions with Ministers before they went to the Meeting and five representatives were accredited to the Meeting and presented the Statement. The Statement and the regional reports were used as background documents for the preparation of the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Financing for Development. Consultations have continued prior to recent meetings. In 2005, civil society groups were invited to a special breakfast meeting by the Prime Minister of Barbados and were also invited to the special session of the Finance Ministers that met in Barbados in September 2005.

Education Ministers:

Recent meetings of Education Ministers have included parallel civil society events including

civil society symposia, seminars and joint plenary sessions. There was interaction between government and CSO representatives who moved between the intergovernmental and civil society events. Recommendations of the ministerial meetings drew from the outcomes of the civil society meetings.

Health Ministers:

Each year, Commonwealth Health Ministers meet for one day before the World Health Assembly Meeting. CSOs that have been collaborating with the Commonwealth are able to attend the meeting and participate in roundtable discussions. Recent CSO inputs have focused on HIV and AIDS and recruitment and retention of health professionals. Following the meetings, CSOs are invited to partner in implementing the recommendations.

Youth Ministers:

The meetings of Youth Ministers have an integrated civil society and participation process, and a youth representative attends the actual Ministers' meeting. Consultations are held between Ministers and youth CSOs

prior to the meeting. Some government delegations also include youth representatives. There is also a process for reporting back to youth CSOs in every Commonwealth country, including ways for CSOs to be involved in implementation.

Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG):

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) was established in 1995 to ensure that countries abide by the Harare principles. CMAG is made up of a rotating group of Foreign Ministers who look into "serious or persistent violations of the principles" contained in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration. As of the meeting in May 2004, the group consists of The Bahamas, Canada, India, Lesotho, Malta, Nigeria, Samoa, Sri Lanka and Tanzania. While the Harare Declaration refers to a broader concept of human rights, it is mostly political values that are under review by CMAG - with a focus on the unconstitutional overthrow of democratically elected governments.

CMAG looks into the problem and recommends action. CMAG usually acts

through negotiations with the governments under review. If changes do not occur, CMAG can recommend to the Heads of Government that the country should be suspended or expelled from the Commonwealth. For example, Pakistan was suspended from the councils of the association following the overthrow of the democratically elected government in 1999. The suspension was eventually lifted in May 2004.

The importance of CMAG as a target for advocacy:

- ▶ CMAG is mandated to look into violations of the Harare Principles. These violations includes human rights violations. CMAG is one of the few Commonwealth bodies that is mandated to act - with the power to even suspend or expel members.
- ▶ CMAG can be encouraged to conduct its own investigations through a fact-finding mission.
- ▶ CMAG accepts submissions and at times will even take representations from CSOs. This is one way of providing

further information about an area of concern as well as encouraging action. To add power to your own voice, you can also encourage other CSOs to make their own submissions too - this means that well before a CMAG meeting, you should circulate information on your concern and tell other groups about CMAG. Submissions should be sent to the Head of Political Affairs at the Commonwealth Secretariat - and can also be sent to other Commonwealth organisations and the media.

Expert Groups and Committees:

From time to time, various **Expert Groups and Committees** are formed to investigate a topic of concern to the Commonwealth. This is a good opportunity for civil society organisations to express their views to Commonwealth bodies, including views on human rights and other related issues. The best contacts to find out about such opportunities as they come up are the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation.

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) has long been directing its advocacy efforts towards the Commonwealth, with a view to encouraging member states as well as the Commonwealth Secretariat itself to implement comprehensive information access regimes. CHRI regularly highlights the value of the right to information at Commonwealth Ministerial meetings, tailoring its submissions to the interests of the specific Ministers in attendance. In 2003, CHRI produced a comprehensive report, "Open Sesame: Looking for the Right to Information in the Commonwealth", which it used as an advocacy document to explain the issue to attendees of the 2003 CHOGM. As a result of advocacy efforts at CHOGM, coupled with media pressure, support from local partners, input into the Commonwealth Expert Group on Democracy and Development's report and lobbying of delegations, the need to work on right to information was specifically recognised in paragraph 7 of the Aso Rock Declaration issued at the 2003 CHOGM in Nigeria.

An example was the Commonwealth Expert Group on Democracy and Development which was formed at CHOGM 2002 and

which reported to CHOGM 2003 on ways to bring about people-centred development as described in the Commonwealth's 1999 Fancourt Declaration. The focus was on how to support democracies to combat poverty. Another Expert Group has investigated the issue of asset repatriation.

Some of the key Commonwealth organisations also have advisory committees that could be used as a vehicle to take human rights concerns further. An example is the Civil Society Advisory Committee (CSAC) of the Commonwealth Foundation which advises the Foundation on its policies and programmes related to civil society. CSAC can be contacted through the Commonwealth Foundation.

The Unofficial or "People's" Commonwealth:

The Commonwealth has been described not only as an association of nations but also of peoples. The term "Unofficial Commonwealth" describes the groups that are not part of the formal structure of the Commonwealth, but are recognised as

playing a vital role in its work. The Commonwealth Foundation assists the unofficial Commonwealth and is an important link between the official and people's Commonwealths. There are thousands of NGOs, professional associations and civil society groups in the Commonwealth and each has its own governance, structure, mandate, membership system and operational procedures. Therefore, the options for involvement and advocacy will vary depending on the individual organisation.

There are currently 35 CSOs that are officially accredited with the Commonwealth, as well as several other Commonwealth associations and CSOs that are not accredited, all working for people across the Commonwealth. CSO advocacy efforts towards the Commonwealth Secretariat and member states are generally done through letters, domestic parliamentary submissions, face-to-face meetings and by offering expert technical services on the issue to interested officials. The Commonwealth Human Rights Network (CHRN) aims to build links between people involved in human rights from around the Commonwealth. For more information contact:
chnr@humanrightsinitiative.org

Some Commonwealth Associations are also active in the area of human rights - particularly the associations of journalists, lawyers, press, legal educators, broadcasters and parliamentarians. Professional associations in the Commonwealth can be targets for advocacy to encourage them to ensure human rights issues are included in their activities. They can be used as vehicles to further human rights concerns in member countries and in the Secretariat. Many of these associations have annual or biennial conferences which can be venues for advocacy.

The Commonwealth Human Rights Network which has over 280 members in 43 Commonwealth countries (with the number of members growing constantly) is an example of civil society from all over the Commonwealth working together towards a common goal in a spirit of collaboration. The Network was set up in 2003 just before the first Commonwealth Human Rights Forum held in Abuja, Nigeria. CHRN represents a major step for civil society organisations towards building networks for collaboration with the aim of advocating for human rights across and within the Commonwealth and its member states.

Accreditation to the Commonwealth:

Accreditation to the Commonwealth gives civil society organisations certain benefits which help them in their advocacy work. These benefits include:

- ▶ Visitor's access to the Headquarters of the Commonwealth at Marlborough House in London. This access includes the possibility of arranging informal discussions with staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation as well as consultations with Commonwealth officers;
- ▶ Access to public information which is not readily available on the internet as well as Commonwealth information materials and newsletters;
- ▶ Access to consultation processes such as sector focus group meetings or special consultations on specific areas of interest;
- ▶ Access to official Commonwealth meetings - the type and extent of such

access varies according to the meetings. All organisations accredited with the Commonwealth can apply to be accredited at the CHOGM. Access to the various meetings may vary from being able to submit papers, to receiving reports approved by Heads of Government, being invited to the opening ceremony and other social events, or being allowed to participate in activities organised to interact with the Committee of the Whole.

Civil society organisations wishing to be accredited should write a letter on their letterhead to the Commonwealth Secretariat specifying their intention to become accredited. Together with the letter, the organisation must also attach additional information at the request of the Secretariat. Applications for accreditation are considered by the Commonwealth Accreditation Committee twice a year - in March and September. Accredited status is periodically reviewed to ensure that accredited organisations are complying with the criteria required for accreditation.

For further information about the requirements for obtaining accreditation to the

Commonwealth please consult the official Commonwealth website:

<http://www.thecommonwealth.org> (in the 'Civil Society' subsection of the 'What we do' section, under the heading 'Core Information'. You may also contact the Civil Society Liaison Officer at the Commonwealth Secretariat).

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Website: www.humanrightsinitiative.org