



Reducing, reusing and recycling in Aurangabad, India.



Improving local government

Carl Wright, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), details the principles and practice that bring progress to local democracy.

Local democracy is a vital part of democratic government. Indeed, the roots of a more representative system often spring up at the local level and have a positive impact on making national governments more democratic. It is increasingly being recognised that sustainable development cannot be done by national or state/provincial governments alone, and that local authorities are best placed to help improve living conditions, reduce poverty, and promote participatory democracy.

With rapid urbanisation, the global financial crisis, and the growing impact of migration and climate change, local government's role is increasingly important because of its closeness to the people and its responsibility for delivery of essential services. Many

national governments are acknowledging this and are moving towards a more decentralised approach.

Democratic local government provides the best opportunity for people to play a role in making the decisions that affect their quality of life – including many of the basic services such as health, water, sanitation, housing and education. These are exactly the areas where progress is necessary if we are to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and improve the quality of life for the two billion citizens of the Commonwealth. Indeed, the role of local government was identified as central to the successful achievement of the MDGs, and essential service delivery, at the UN Global Forum, Kampala 2010.

Providing local leadership

Basic services are essential for improving the quality of people's lives. However, local government can have a much bigger impact if it takes seriously its role as community leader and space shaper for the development of the area it covers. There is general agreement that the role of local government must go beyond traditional service delivery and provide the leadership needed to energise local economies and

“Our lives are lived locally, our governments are experienced locally. For most people local government is their first and perhaps only contact with the authorities in their country.”

H E Kamalesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General, speaking at the 2011 Commonwealth Local Government Conference in Cardiff, UK.

communities. More and more local governments in countries across the Commonwealth have responsibilities and powers for improving the well-being of citizens, tackling poverty and social exclusion, improving the environment and local economic development – in fact having a vision for their areas to create a thriving place where people want to work, do business and spend leisure time. In some countries local authorities can already show how their policies and actions are helping revitalise their areas, while in other countries local councils are just beginning to get to grips with their leadership role.

Local government also has a valuable contribution to make in conflict resolution, especially in post-conflict situations and fragile political environments. Promoting respect, action at the local level can often take root and bring results of understanding between neighbours in a way that is difficult to do at a national level.

Disaster management is another area where local government is at the forefront; whether it is the effects of a tsunami, floods or earthquakes, it is local government that is first on the scene, coming to the rescue of those made homeless, those needing counselling and developing plans to rebuild a town or city when disaster has struck.

Building capacity

But local government does not always have the capacity to meet these challenges – either financial or human resources. That is why the work of the CLGF, the Commonwealth Secretariat and other partners is so important.

The 54 countries of the Commonwealth are at different stages of decentralisation and developing local democracy. Some countries already have very strong systems while others are just beginning on the road. Unfortunately, decentralisation does not always guarantee that the resources will match the responsibilities and services given to local councils.

Technical support for improving local government

Based on the principles of democratic local government (see box), CLGF provides technical support to its members to improve their structures, services and their ability to lead their communities through donor-funded programmes and projects at a national, regional or pan-Commonwealth level. Policy direction is provided by recommendations and outcomes of CLGF

policy events, and via direct consultation with members and stakeholders. Initiatives are designed to strengthen local democratic structures, improve governance arrangements and to facilitate better service delivery, to contribute towards the achievement of global poverty reduction targets including the MDGs.

Learning and skills exchange is very important in supporting local governments to improve their practices and services: CLGF has sought to build strong national and regional networks of local government, including supporting the establishment and strengthening of local government associations to facilitate this learning. Capacity building activities target local elected members, council staff, and

Democratic principles of local governance

At the 2005 Commonwealth Local Government Conference in Aberdeen, CLGF members agreed the *Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth principles on good practice for local democracy and good governance*. This outlined 12 core principles:

- Constitutional and legal recognition for local democracy;
- The ability to elect local representatives in conditions of political freedom;
- Partnerships between spheres of government;
- Legislative framework to ensure local government has the appropriate powers in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity;
- Opportunity to participate in local decision-making;
- Open local government – accountability to the community;
- Open local government – transparency of decision-making;
- Openness to scrutiny;
- Inclusiveness to reflect social, economic, environmental and cultural needs of the whole community;
- Adequate and equitable resource allocation;
- Equitable service delivery;
- Building strong local democracy and good governance.

These principles were incorporated into the fundamental values of the Commonwealth in 2009. They provide a benchmark for reviewing local democracy and have already been used in Uganda and a number of other Commonwealth countries.



officials in state/provincial or national government and have become involved both North/South and South/South partnerships.

The Forum has been supporting its members to help them assess their performance on effective delivery of services to the local community. As part of this, CLGF has pioneered local government peer reviews in Southern Africa and developed training modules for local democracy and good government in South Asia. These projects have a 'trickle-down' approach where in-country practitioners develop expertise in training and review to carry on the work themselves.

Sharing knowledge

Sharing experience, skills and ideas nationally and internationally is of lasting benefit to those working in local government. In this field the Commonwealth offers a vast array of experience, expertise and good practice in decentralisation. Learning from the past experiences of others, innovations in policy and service delivery and models of good practice are vital if local governments are to respond to the global challenges they face, and meet the needs of their citizens.

The *Commonwealth e-Journal on Local Governance*, which CLGF publishes in co-operation with the Commonwealth Secretariat, provides a forum for in-depth discussion of issues and trends, and case studies on good practice. This is one of a number of research publications commissioned and published by CLGF and the Governance and Institutional Development Division (GIDD) at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The network of associate members, many of whom are leading institutions in local government thinking, are important in making a valuable contribution to CLGF's policy debates. Commissioned research and events have helped to lead vital policy discussion on

The city of Aurangabad, India, comprises just over 1 million people and is divided into 6 wards. One ward, Jyoti Nagar was the pilot area for the enhanced waste management project as part of the GLCF Good Practice Scheme to improve waste management through reducing, reusing and recycling. Comprising approximately 500 domestic apartments and other properties it has a population of 2,500 residents. The project linked the area with Birmingham City Council in the UK to develop the project.

issues such as local government finance, inclusiveness, gender equality and local economic development. These not only influence CLGF's own policy development, but are a catalyst for the development of policies at national and local level in member countries.

The extensive CLGF membership network helps it to punch above its weight in supporting and delivering local democracy and improvement in institutions and services throughout the Commonwealth, from small island states in the Pacific across Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. The ever-closer working relationship with the Commonwealth Secretariat, as well as with Commonwealth associated organisations, is helping to maximise and target resources, and provide more regional support. In this way, the Commonwealth can make a direct and cost-effective contribution to improving local government, to efficient service delivery to the community, and to enhancing the core values of democracy and good governance.

Contact Details

Carl Wright has been Secretary General of CLGF since it was founded in 1994/5, and has been responsible for initiating key programmes such as the CLGF Good Practice Scheme. He was previously founding Director of the Commonwealth Trade Union Council, and Assistant Director at the Commonwealth Secretariat. He has served on specialised Commonwealth, UN, EU, OECD and other international committees and expert groups.

The **Commonwealth Local Government Forum** (CLGF) provides a collective voice for local government, and ensures that this is heard at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings and other key Commonwealth and international meetings. CLGF promotes local government as an important part of government – and promotes knowledge sharing of innovation and good practice through its networks, capacity building programmes and events. In its work, CLGF co-operates closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat, and in particular GIDD.

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