

CLGF

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) works to promote and strengthen effective democratic local government throughout the Commonwealth and to encourage the exchange of good practice in local government structures and services.

TIME FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

The Aberdeen Agenda:

Commonwealth Principles on Good Practice for
Local Democracy and Good Governance



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INTRODUCTION

Commonwealth member states share common values of democracy and standards as set out in the Commonwealth Harare Declaration and other decisions by Heads of Government. The shared values, structures and experiences within the Commonwealth family moreover provide a framework for working together in partnership and undertaking joint activities.

Many countries in the Commonwealth are actively engaged in strengthening the democratic process. Some have well-established systems of elected local government, others are just beginning down this path. Democratically elected local authorities are now being recognised as a distinct sphere of government, with their own specific identity, roles and responsibilities.

Local government responsibilities increasingly include the delivery of key services that are fundamental to tackling poverty, improving well-being and the quality of life of citizens and to delivering the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): education, health, water, sanitation and waste management, housing, rural and urban development and planning.

To help Commonwealth governments and local governments assess the health of local democracy in their own countries, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) is working with members and key stakeholders to determine what principles are important for sound local democracy and good governance.

Carl Wright
Secretary-General, CLGF

DEVELOPING PRINCIPLES AND GOOD PRACTICE

The 2005 Commonwealth Local Government Conference was held in Aberdeen, Scotland from 15-18 March 2005. The theme of the conference was *Deepening Local Democracy*. It brought together more than 500 senior local government stakeholders from more than 40 countries across the Commonwealth - ministers of local government and their officials, local authority associations, mayors, councillors and officers from individual councils, civil society, the private sector, international development partners, and research and training institutions with an interest in local government - to consider what makes effective local governance.

The Aberdeen conference provided a unique forum for sharing practical examples, learning from case studies presented by practitioners, and sharing good practice that has been effective in different parts of the Commonwealth. It also offered delegates some practical tools, especially on the link between elected local government and the delivery of quality services to the community.

The Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth Principles on Good Practice for Local Democracy and Good Governance was formally approved by CLGF member organisations on 18 March 2005 as a result of discussions at the Aberdeen conference, together with a Programme of Action. The Aberdeen Agenda provides a set of standards to promote healthy local democracy and good governance throughout the Commonwealth which CLGF will be taking forward in the coming months. The full text of the Aberdeen Agenda is set out on the following pages.

THE ABERDEEN AGENDA: COMMONWEALTH PRINCIPLES ON GOOD PRACTICE FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

The General Meeting of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, convened in Aberdeen, Scotland, 18 March 2005, following the Third Commonwealth Local Government Conference Deepening Local Democracy 15-17 March 2005, attended by over 500 delegates from 46 countries, including over 20 ministers with responsibility for local government:

Re-confirming that:

- All Commonwealth member states share core democratic values and standards and as agreed at the 1997 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, “effective, elected local government is an important foundation for democracy” and is the system adopted by a majority of Commonwealth countries, and although there is no one single model to follow, its establishment should be encouraged.
- Our shared values, structures and experiences within the Commonwealth family provide a framework for working together in partnership and undertaking joint activities under the auspices of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF).

Recalling:

- The core values and principles of the Commonwealth as set out in the 1991 Harare Declaration and subsequent CHOGM decisions, including the 2002 High Level Review, in particular as they relate to adherence to democracy, the rule of law, good governance, freedom of expression and the protection of human rights;
- The mandates established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in respect of local government and the role of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum at their meetings in 1995, 1997, 1999, 2002 and 2003, notably in relation to the promotion of local democracy and good governance;
- The importance attached to local democracy and good governance, community empowerment and effective decentralisation as a means to reduce poverty and implement the UN Millennium Development Goals, its Specialised

Agencies, notably UN Habitat, and other international development agencies, including under the ACP-EU Cotonou Agreement;

- The previous decisions of the CLGF, in particular the 2000 London Statement on Local Government Priorities for the New Millennium and the 2003 Tshwane Statement on the CLGF Work Programme.

Emphasising:

- The fundamental link between freedom, development and local democracy, as noted in the 2003 Commonwealth Expert Group on Development and democracy and further highlighted in the CLGF report on Deepening Local Democracy prepared for the 2005 Aberdeen Conference.

Welcoming:

- Recent initiatives to accelerate the implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals and the growing recognition of the role of democratic local government in this regard;
- The report of the Commission for Africa, Our Common Interest, and in this context seeking an early implementation of the Commission’s recommendations, especially as they relate to local government.

Noting:

- The vulnerability and special development needs of small states as highlighted by the impact of recent natural disasters in the Caribbean and Asia, and the detrimental effects of climate change in the Pacific and elsewhere, and the key contribution which democratic local government can make to post-disaster reconstruction for example following the recent Asian tsunami disaster;
- The impact of HIV/AIDS on delivery of local government services.

Endorsing:

- The reports and recommendations of the 2004 Commonwealth regional symposia on local democracy and good governance, held in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

Resolves to:

- Agree, as set out below, Commonwealth Principles on Good Practice for Local Democracy and Good Governance as a set of standards which will guide government policies to promote local democracy and good governance throughout the Commonwealth;
- Recommend to all CLGF member organisations the implementation of the Commonwealth Principles and propose that CLGF's work in this area be guided by the fulfilment of these Principles;
- Propose the formal endorsement of the Commonwealth Principles to Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in Malta in November 2005 as well as to other partner organisations and request their support in the provision of technical and other support to enable implementation of the Principles;
- Request the CLGF Board and Director to develop the above recommendations and secure resources for their implementation.

COMMONWEALTH PRINCIPLES ON GOOD PRACTICE FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

- **Constitutional and legal recognition for local democracy:** local democracy should enjoy constitutional and legal recognition.

Local government should be recognised as a sphere of government. Legal and constitutional recognition are important to protect the fundamental principle of local democracy. Respect for this protection ensures institutional security for local democracy.

- **The ability to elect local representatives:** citizens should be able to elect their local representatives in conditions of political freedom.

It is important for local representatives to reflect the views and needs of the community they serve. We believe that this is best achieved through regular/timely local elections which are both open and inclusive. Whatever the means or processes of local democracy, the results should reflect the wishes of the electorate.

- **Partnerships between spheres of government:** there should be cooperation and partnership among local, regional/provincial and national spheres of government.

Effective democracy demands respect between the different spheres of government and recognises the defined roles they play in serving their citizens.

It is important to ensure that there is regular dialogue and cooperation between the different spheres. Strong intergovernmental relations will promote greater alignment of national, regional and local priorities. Significant decentralisation

requires cooperation and strengthened coordination between the different spheres of government.

- **Defined legislative framework:** local democracy should ensure local government has appropriate powers in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

Democratic local government, with clearly defined powers, serves as the means by which the community can shape their livelihoods.

Effective devolution enables the views of the local community to be expressed and their views taken into account in decisions implemented to improve the quality of life of all citizens locally.

■ **Opportunity to participate in local decision-making:** all citizens should be able to participate actively in the local democratic process.

Local democracy gives citizens the freedom to participate in making decisions that are locally appropriate and serve the needs of local community. Effective consultation is central to the engagement of the community in the local policy making process.

However, critical to this is a vibrant civil society and a clearly defined relationship between it and local government. It is important for local government to be proactive, and reach out to its communities to ensure that public participation is maximised. The political will to develop that relationship with its electorate must be nurtured within the local council itself.

The building of a robust relationship between local government and civil society is central to local democracy and to the development of sustainable communities.

■ **Open local government – accountability:** local government should be accountable to the community it serves.

Local government should be accountable to the community it serves while operating within the legal and policy framework of other spheres of government.

Robust, independent regulatory bodies need to be in place to safeguard against corruption, mismanagement and the inappropriate use of resources by local government, politicians, and officials.

Civil society needs to be strengthened as a counterpart in this process. Participatory budgeting is a tool for enhancing accountability which is also effective at training local civil society in holding their local councils to account.

■ **Open local government – transparency:** the local decision making process should be open and transparent.

The way local government makes decisions should be clear and

clearly communicated to the community it serves. Local councils need to adopt a public information strategy using different media and reaching all of society.

■ **Openness to scrutiny:** The work of the executive should be subject to scrutiny.

Policy determined by the executive/local authority should be open to scrutiny by other elected members and appropriate civil society organisations/ community individuals. Effective leadership should welcome scrutiny both from within the local council and by the wider community.

This requires skilled councillors and individuals in civil society able to effectively scrutinise policy and processes intelligently and constructively.

■ **Inclusiveness:** the process of local decision-making must reflect the social, economic, environmental and cultural needs of the entire community.

Decisions should be taken at the level closest to the community to which they relate. Consultation is essential to ensure the needs of the whole community are met, especially with disadvantaged groups including women, youth, minority groups and people with disabilities, whose voices are often neglected.

The Commonwealth and the CLGF are committed to a target of no less than 30 per cent of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors, and to developing strategies for increasing their active participation.

Commitment to downward accountability is critical to citizen engagement. Participatory planning is a tool to ensure inclusive and equitable planning.

■ **Adequate and equitable resource allocation:** in order to respond to the needs of the local community.

Local government must have adequate financial resources to fulfil its mandate and ensure significant autonomy in resource allocation.

An independent and secure revenue base is key to sound management of resources, and included in this is the predictability and adequacy of financial transfers from central to local government in terms of timeliness and amounts. Such transfers must be free of political bias, and a local government agreement or legal framework

to govern such transfers is often of critical importance.

In the distribution of resources, local government must be seen as an integral part of the overall public sector involved in delivering key public services.

- **Equitable service delivery:** the distribution of services should reflect the diverse needs of the local community.

Services provided by local government should be accessible to all. The poor and marginalised, may in certain circumstances, require local government to adopt proactive policies to address their particular needs.

There is a balance to be struck between nationally set standards and locally set priorities. Local government should have the space to respond to the needs of its local area.

- **Building strong local democracy and good governance:** commitment to continuous capacity development of democratic local government

Effective leadership is central to strong local democracy. It is important to strengthen and build the capacity of councillors, officers, and local governance institutions to ensure that local democracy can enable local government to deliver quality services to the local community. Community leadership is an important and growing role for local government in the creation of sustainable communities.

There is also a need to promote civic education and build the capacity of civil society organisations to enable them to engage in and participate effectively in the local democratic process.

Measuring a council's process and performance in terms of local democracy and governance based on empirical evidence, is key to informing its developmental strategies.

There is a role for councils and communities to develop international partnerships. There is a role for international local government organisations, including CLGF, in assisting its members in building stronger local democracy. CLGF should assist in building capacity through a number of means including the exchange of good practice, the dissemination of information and specific technical assistance projects.

TIME FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY: PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

CLGF is widely disseminating the Aberdeen Agenda throughout the Commonwealth and to partner organisations. It is encouraging its local government and ministry members to hold discussions at senior policy level on how the principles can be used effectively to help develop policies and monitor policy and practice throughout the Commonwealth.

CLGF's future work in this area will be shaped by how it can help its members to implement the principles. It plans to develop the principles into practical tools for members to use including through the identification of specific indicators for each principle.

The *Aberdeen Agenda* will be put to Commonwealth governments for their political endorsement and to secure resources for implementation and the development of a coherent CLGF programme in support of local democracy and good governance.