

## Commonwealth Local Young Leaders' Forum Report Commonwealth Local Government Conference 2017



The Commonwealth Local Young Leaders' Forum was held prior to the Commonwealth Local Government Conference 2017, under the theme: "Fit for the Future: resources and capacity for effective local government", in Valletta, Malta, from November 20-21, 2017. The Commonwealth Local Government Conference is held every two years and organised by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, an associated Commonwealth Organisation, with the aim of strengthening local government and facilitate an exchange of best practices.

Young councillors, mayors and youth representatives from the different regions of the Commonwealth participated in this two-day forum and deliberated on issues of importance to them and their work such as: participatory governance and holding local government to account, including youth and gender budgeting and financial transparency; support for youth in the community; understanding local government and its role in providing an enabling environment for youth development and enterprise; and developing leadership skills.

The function of local government is very broad and interpreted differently across the Commonwealth; however a common objective is to provide for its residents on a local and personal level. In practice, this means that each council determines what they need to do to ensure "peace, order and good governance" of their municipalities. Essentially each council makes its own decisions based on its collective beliefs, the advice it receives, various financial considerations, legislative powers and so on.

Young people recognise local government as the level for direct community development, strengthening social cohesion, community togetherness, democracy, inclusivity, civic engagement and participation.

In the Commonwealth, sixty percent of the total population is below the age of 30. It is therefore pertinent that young people, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, or disability, are encouraged and supported to participate in local government structures. As elected councillors or through community engagement, young people can contribute a level of creativity, innovation, technological options to local government and community development.

The issues and recommendations discussed during the forum are summarised below. It must be noted that the recommendations ought to be interpreted within each country's context, cognisant of the different levels of development, systems, structures and legislations governing local government in Commonwealth member states.

### **Leadership**

There was a general discussions around good leadership and governance at the local government level which remains an issue for many local governments in the Commonwealth; specifically, issues around accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and autonomy.

The level of youth participation in local government across the Commonwealth varies. In some countries, there is little interest to contest local government elections and as such, only few young people are elected as councillors or mayors. In other countries, for example, in Malta, more young people contest elections and are elected to serve as mayors of their communities. It was agreed that more spaces ought to be created for youth engagement and participation as well as opportunities to contest local government elections.

Panelists and participants emphasised the importance of leadership and a range of other skills for elected councillors to perform and execute their responsibilities, namely human resource management, budgeting and finance, and project implementation. This reduces the efficiency and effectiveness of local government.

Intergenerational and peer-to-peer mentoring programmes were discussed as possible paths to helping build mutually respectful relationships. This would enable a sense of nurturing and feedback to take place through ongoing communication which could indirectly inspire and educate not only youth councillors but young people who have an interest in local government. This would build confidence and create a supportive environment for young people who would like to get involved and serve at local level.

### **Learning**

Across the Commonwealth, some countries are faced with low civic education among their population, including limited knowledge on the role and structure of local government. This often results in low levels of participation and engagement between citizens and the local government system, limited community collective action, low voter turnout on election day and lack of confidence in the local government system.

## **Finances**

Local government relies heavily on transfers from central government and local tax and fee collection, which are often insufficient to manage the affairs of a municipality, along with projects and programmes geared to contribute to community development. It was again noted that political control from central government can influence budget allocation and spending at the local levels.

In some countries, municipalities are restricted from generating any own-source revenue, taking loans or development assistance or entering public-private partnership. This is a disadvantage to councils and community members who can mobilise resources for social and economic development. Investing in community development is critical to realising the goals and targets of the Sustainable Development Goals.

It was agreed that levying more taxes on community members is not the solution in moving forward. Instead, youth entrepreneurship, social enterprising and public-private partnership were proposed as more sustainable options to promote community development. Local councillors can support these initiatives particularly where facilities are underutilised or through leased land. Additionally, participants noted the role of innovation/technology and skills development spaces which can support young people's creativity. Community think tanks or mixers are also models which allow young professionals to network and exchange ideas, vision and their current contributions with an objective to integrate them.

## **Engagement**

Community engagement is a process which contributes to inclusive decision-making, collaboration, and community planning. However, there are many challenges in fostering community engagement and often times there is a breakdown in communication and reach. It was agreed that direct face to face engagement is still important which can be supported by multimedia such as radio, social media and apps.

Public meetings, consultation, deliberate policies for youth participation, cohesion tools, and community empowerment, among others, are important to strengthening engagement at the community level.

## **Recommendations**

1. To increase local autonomy, we strongly recommend increased devolution of powers to local authorities to allow councillors to manage their communities and make decision in keeping with the needs of their communities.
2. We recommend council support for youth-focused sub-committees to oversee specific programs and projects. These youth focused sub-committees should include community representation.

3. Considering the growth and positive impact of youth entrepreneurship and social enterprising, we urge the governments of the Commonwealth to create/amend legislation changes to facilitate the establishment and operations of youth entrepreneurship and social enterprise.
4. We recommend to the mayors, councillors and ministers of local government to establish local economic development boards led by councillors and community representatives, to develop and implement strategies focused on growth at the community level.
5. We recommend increased collaboration between local authorities and CSOs to increase knowledge and awareness at the community level on the local government system. Further, similar collaborations can also address major social issues at the community level in a timely manner.
6. The Commonwealth Local Young Leaders' Forum is a space whereby young councillors and youth representatives meet to discuss challenges, strategies, policies, and solutions pertaining to local government/governance structures. We, therefore, urge the Commonwealth Local Government Conference to recognise and institutionalize the Commonwealth Local Young Leaders' Forum as an official activity of the biennial Conference and provide appropriate support.
7. We recommend support mechanisms for young councillors such as facilitating mentorship programmes and young councilors exchange programme in the Commonwealth. We urge senior councilors to mentor and support young councilors in their capacities.
8. In addition to regular direct communication, we recommend a multimedia approach (where possible) to enhance engagement between councillors and community members, such as the use of social media – live stream meetings; website to share information on projects, works, announcement; use of radio; apps where community members can log reports;
9. Local government must implement deliberate policies that allow young people to run for office
10. We encourage young people and students to engage their local councillors regularly and attend council's meeting where session are open to the public.
11. We encourage the creation of local hubs and space to build leadership, empowerment and resources for young people
12. It is imperative that certain council committees have a quota system designated just for youth, this system will ensure that youth participate, ideas and recommendations and heard and implemented.