

TERRAVIVA

THE INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER OF THE COMMONWEALTH PEOPLE'S FORUM - ABUJA NIGERIA, DECEMBER 1 - 7, 2003

Expert Group Shows a Way Forward

By Sanjay Suri

ABUJA: SLOGANS OF democracy and development will not be enough, and heads of government coming to the biennial Commonwealth meeting in Abuja will discuss an eight-point plan to promote them.

The plan has been prepared by an expert group headed by former Indian finance minister Dr Manmohan Singh. The plan reportedly identifies priorities for definite and visible action by the heads of government.

In part the plan suggests only the creation of more committees. These are said to include establishment of a technical group to draw up Commonwealth codes of good practice on budgets, expenditure management and accountability. The expert group is believed also to have asked for structures to make sure that Commonwealth governments monitor and enforce the codes recommended.

The expert group has asked also for steps to develop institutions to expand democracy beyond elections. That must mean citizen participation, local democracy and human rights, the group says. The group has asked also for strengthening mechanisms to monitor press freedom throughout the Commonwealth.

Local democracy must mean decentralisation of power to local

government institutions that are accountable, transparent and representative, the group says. It has asked for legal representation for local government, and paying to ensure that decentralisation works.

Corruption must be taken on as a major priority, the expert group is believed to have recommended. In this the Commonwealth can assist in repatriation of illegally acquired public funds and assets transferred abroad. The group has asked the Commonwealth to consider proposing legal frameworks for this. The group has also proposed an international convention on this.

A particular recommendation, one that Commonwealth secretary-general

The group is reported to have said the Commonwealth secretariat should provide technical support to poor member countries to increase their capacity to negotiate within the WTO.

All this cannot happen without more money, and the group is said to have recommended a doubling of overseas development assistance to 100 billion dollars.

The British Treasury has already proposed an international financing facility. The Commonwealth has been trying for some time to take a leading role in running such a facility.

The group is believed also to have recommended a strengthened aid administration in beneficiary countries,

The group that was set up to make a set of recommendations on promotion of democracy and development makes it clear that it is time for specific steps, not for slogans. An exclusive report on the findings of the panel.

Don McKinnon has taken up already is to push the case of developed countries in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It has asked for provisions within the WTO for poor Commonwealth countries to undertake liberalisation in ways that do not hurt the poor.

reduction in tied aid and an increase in direct budgetary support. It has asked for measures to enhance stable flow of private investment to developing countries, and flexible approaches to debt relief.

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Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo (right) with chairman of the CHOGM committee Aderemi Esan (top), and with director of the Commonwealth Foundation Colin Ball (above) at the opening of the Commonwealth People's Forum in Abuja Sunday evening. The forum has arranged scores of activities to be held at several centres all week. Report on Page 4.

New Democracy

DEMOCRACY IS being recognized now as something more than a vote every five years or so. A government is not authorized to do as it pleases just because the party that leads it got more votes than some others, and never usually the vote of the majority, even among those who voted.

And so the new trends of the times. The World Social Forum has gathered significance hugely over three years at Porto Alegre in Brazil; its annual meeting in Mumbai next month is seen as a step further forward. The European Social Forum held in and around Paris last month drew about 40,000 delegates, and a resolution that resolutions are not enough; people must act and not just talk.

And so now therefore a Commonwealth People's Forum in Abuja. It's the way of the times. Civil society is assuming the voice of the people. With what legitimacy, many of its critics (and there are many) have begun to ask. Governments are at least accountable to people every few years, civil society is not similarly accountable at all.

The test really will be what civil society does, never mind what it says or what others say. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are asking governments to do a lot, but they are on test themselves.

The CPF is bringing together civil society groups, professional associations, faith groups and cultural groups. The aim is to promote networking among these groups "and to showcase the work and contributions of these organizations to the fundamental principles and values of the Commonwealth."

The theme of the people's forum is 'citizens and governance'. The people's forum has been organized by the Commonwealth Foundation, an inter-governmental organisation of the Commonwealth with a mandate to strengthen the role of civil society organizations.

It aims to take the voice of civil society to government and to raise the visibility of CSOs. The forum is aiming also to strengthen the Nigerian connection by firming up links with Nigerian CSOs, and to highlight the cultural heritage of Nigeria.

A lot of aims will be on test this week.

Towards a Common Goal

 By Don McKinnon
Secretary-General

WITH THE end of the Cold War came renewed hope that democratic systems would spread their influence worldwide and bring about increased growth and prosperity. It was assumed that, democracy and development being intimately linked, greater freedom would bring increased economic development. But while a number of democracies have indeed prospered, many countries have yet to reap the fruits of freedom.

Most people would still argue that such a link exists. But the key challenge is to understand how this connection actually works, how democratic values and practices can be harnessed to help communities achieve more growth, develop better health and education

systems, and increase their living standards.

We also need to understand better how economic and social development impacts on a nation's democratic culture. Greater knowledge about this process can help shape future policy to ensure that economic progress enhances citizens' opportunities and allows them to play an active role in the democratic life of their country.



Don McKinnon

That is why Commonwealth leaders, when they met in Coolom, Australia, in March 2002, agreed that an expert group on Development and Democracy be formed. Chaired by Dr Manmohan Singh, former Finance Minister of India, the group was tasked with exploring the interdependence between development and democracy and determining ways in which they can be mutually reinforcing for the benefit of all Commonwealth citizens.

Democracy and development are the twin engines of social progress. The two are inseparable. A country cannot achieve long-term growth if its citizens are not free to play their full part in the democratic process. Economic growth is more likely to be achieved in a stable political environment that recognises the value of the individual and empowers all citizens to achieve their full potential.

The challenge for us is to harness this interdependence and ensure democracy and development are mutually reinforcing. In other words, we must make freedom work for growth and make growth work for freedom.

Commonwealth leaders will focus on these issues when they meet at the 2003 Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Abuja, Nigeria, from 5-8 December. The outcome of their discussions will provide a road map which will define the future direction of the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat. This work will build on the Commonwealth's long experience in promoting democracy and on its

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Expert Group Speaks

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The expert group has asked for changes beyond the Commonwealth that could benefit member countries. Member countries are asked to ensure deeper participation in poverty reduction programmes and development strategies. Again, the expert group wants the Commonwealth to anchor these recommendations into specific programmes that are observable and can be reported.

Finally the expert group wants the Commonwealth to become more proactive in addressing conflict involving member states, because international action is weakest when conflict involves countries that are among the poorest.

Many countries in Africa are particularly at risk, the expert group is believed to have noted. The commonwealth must mobilise

international support to address concerns in such areas, and facilitate regional peace initiatives. The group says the Commonwealth must take up such issues alongside the United Nations.

The group has pointed out that while development programmes are geared towards the Millennium Development Goals, one-third of the Commonwealth's two billion people live on less than a dollar a day, and nearly two-thirds on less than two dollars a day.

The group sets out a brave new role for civil society

Of the 31 top priority countries to meet the MDGs, nine are from the Commonwealth (Cameroon, Kenya, Lesotho, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sierra

Leone, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe). But the situation within the Commonwealth could be worse, because insufficient data means that 13 Commonwealth states cannot be classified.

The report notes that the number of democracies has grown from 35 to 130 over the past 25 years. But many Commonwealth countries have failed to implement democratic procedures.

In addressing such needs both in development and democracy, the expert group points to a strong role for civil society, which it calls the third push towards those two goals, after government and the role of the market.

Where the voice of the poor cannot be heard directly within government, civil society and the media must give voice to holding government and the private sector to account, the group is reported to have said. The report will be officially released this week.

The Commonwealth has shown on many occasions – and continues to show – that its commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law is not merely rhetorical.

- The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on the Harare Declaration (CMAG), was set up in 1995 to act as the custodian of our fundamental political values;

- The Commonwealth was the first international organisation which made it virtually automatic that a country is suspended from its councils in the event of the unconstitutional overthrow of an elected government;

- At Coolom last year, our Heads of Government further empowered CMAG to address situations of serious or persistent violation of the Harare principles even when no overthrow of an elected government had taken place. At present, two member countries are suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth: Pakistan and Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe was suspended in March 2002 following the report of the Commonwealth Observer Group at the Presidential election. Since then, the Troika of Commonwealth leaders constituted at the last CHOGM has sought to engage with the Zimbabwe Government in order to help find a solution that would benefit all the people of the country. I myself have sought such engagement. But despite our best efforts, all our attempts at establishing a dialogue have been spurned and we have seen the situation in Zimbabwe deteriorate continuously.

We will continue in our efforts, however, for our main concern is for the people of Zimbabwe, who are suffering most from this crisis. The only way forward is through constructive engagement, dialogue and reconciliation. That is the way we have fostered from the start and will continue to pursue.

Pakistan remains suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth, but has made significant progress in the re-establishment of democratic institutions. CMAG is to review Pakistan's status in the Commonwealth in December 2003.

Consensus

One of the key elements of the Commonwealth's future programme of work will be to develop initiatives and projects which address development and democracy issues in an integrated fashion.

One important way of achieving progress on both fronts is through consensus-building. The process of global dialogue on which the Commonwealth is based allows leaders to develop joint approaches to problems of common concern and find a way through some of the most protracted issues.

“Through the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), in spite of operating on a very limited budget, remains a very flexible tool which enables it to respond to the needs of member countries quickly and efficiently.”

As a multilateral organisation, the Commonwealth is ideally placed to help countries work through their differences in a spirit of partnership and collaboration. The Commonwealth is a unique forum for global diplomacy and joint decision-making, where the views of all members are listened to and no single country has the upper hand.

One example of effective consensus-building is the Statement on Terrorism issued by Commonwealth leaders shortly after the 11 September 2001 attacks. Since then, the Secretariat has been developing model legislation and implementing kits to assist member countries with the adoption of appropriate counter-terrorism measures.

We also use the power of consensus in the area of trade and economic development. Because it embraces such a great diversity of states – large and small, rich and poor, island and landlocked – the Commonwealth is strategically placed to ensure that the voices of its smaller and developing members are not ignored by the big players.

Indeed, when Commonwealth Trade Ministers met in Cancun in September 2003, they gave their joint support to the Doha Development Agenda as a means to achieve greater fairness in international trade.

The greatest obstacle for effective consensus-building is often the lack of common ground between the nations involved. It is here, precisely, that the Commonwealth advantage lies: our nations are not only united by self-interest; they also share common values, similar political, judicial and administrative structures; they share a common language and a similar business culture. So when it comes to debating difficult issues, we start from a position of common understanding.

This shared sense of belonging is greatly reinforced by the dynamic and hugely diverse Commonwealth civil society community. Indeed, multilateralism does not only operate at an intergovernmental level. Multilateralism is also at the root of the unique relationship that binds the 'official Commonwealth' and our civil society community.

The Commonwealth network comes alive in the efforts of thousands of individuals in some 70 organisations who, through their knowledge and expertise, strengthen cooperation among the people of the Commonwealth. It is thanks to this thriving community that dialogue between Commonwealth countries does not remain at a superficial level, but is rooted in a deep mutual understanding.

The energy and innovative contributions of our NGO community will be on full display at the People's Forum in Abuja, providing one further illustration of how consensus can be an instrument of progress for democracy and development.

I am also confident that the forthcoming CHOGM will demonstrate that, by strengthening existing partnerships and building new ones, we can achieve sustained growth, greater justice and more freedom for the entire Commonwealth community.

The challenges we all face are huge. But the potential for change and progress that can be found in the Commonwealth is also great. By working together, we can show how dialogue between equal partners can deliver new opportunities and greater life chances to every citizen in the Commonwealth.

Don McKinnon has been Commonwealth Secretary-General since April 2000. He previously held a number of Cabinet positions in the New Zealand Government, including Deputy Prime Minister (1990-96) and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade (1990-99).

Towards a Common Goal

Continued from Page 1

achievements in economic and social development.

Development for Democracy

The Commonwealth contributes to make a difference in the lives of its citizens by helping them achieve economic growth and build stronger, healthier and better educated communities.

Through the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), in spite of operating on a very limited budget, remains a very flexible tool which enables it to respond to the needs of member countries quickly and efficiently.

Projects include, for example, advising governments on how to attract

support at both national and regional levels in order to better integrate regional policy into the international trading system.

Small states – and developing countries in general – face particular challenges, such as the recruitment of health professionals to more developed countries. Recognising this problem the Commonwealth Secretariat has developed a code of practice for Commonwealth countries which our Health Ministers have adopted at their meeting in Geneva in May 2003.

The Commonwealth recognises the need for all its citizens to have a voice in the future of their communities. This is why education, health and gender mainstreaming programmes are crucial to the Commonwealth's work.



investment to exploit natural resources. In the petroleum sector, for instance, we helped the Government of Namibia negotiate agreements with international oil companies for offshore exploration projects worth over US\$100 million.

A key objective of the Commonwealth is to ensure that the voices of its smaller and more vulnerable members are heard in international forums. That is why the Secretariat has set up a Small States Office to facilitate the representation of some of our smallest member states at the United Nations in New York.

We help our smaller member states by providing experts who assist them to formulate and implement trade policy and to pursue their interests more effectively in the process of international trade negotiations. In particular, our 'Hub and Spokes' programme provides training and

Democracy for Development

In every aspect of our work, we also acknowledge that countries cannot achieve long-term growth without strong, stable democratic institutions, respect for justice and human rights and a culture of transparency and good governance.

One of the key features of our work is our expanding good offices programme, which strives to pre-empt conflicts and to resolve them when they do occur.

We also help strengthen democratic practices by observing elections, by supporting the development of institutions which safeguard fundamental democratic values, by promoting transparency and accountability in public life and by sharing best practice among Commonwealth countries.

TERRAVIVA

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Paper Diet Feeds the Toothless



Children at a human rights education class conducted by Amnesty International in Pakistan

By Sanjay Suri

THE COMMONWEALTH hasn't done badly on human rights – on paper that is. The Abuja meeting will seek to transfer at least some of those rights on to the street where they are needed.

A Commonwealth Human Rights Forum Dec. 3 and 4 will for the first time bring together non-governmental human rights organisations and national human rights institutions.

The forum is being planned as a platform where urgent human rights issues facing member countries will be raised and presented to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to follow.

So is this just another of those Commonwealth groups, with more print to follow under a new letterhead?

Look at some of the mechanisms the Commonwealth has already:

- The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG): This is made up of a rotating group of eight foreign ministers (currently Australia, the Bahamas, Bangladesh, Botswana, India, Malta, Nigeria and Samoa). Its brief is to look into "serious or persistent violations" of the principles of the Harare Declaration of 1997 which seeks to bind member countries to democracy, the rule of law and human rights.
- The Human Rights Unit, which is the main body responsible for human rights within the Commonwealth Secretariat. It is a free-standing unit that reports directly to the Secretary-General.
- The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation which supports human rights through technical assistance which includes human rights training.
- The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative itself, a non-governmental

group set up with support from the Commonwealth Foundation.

CMAG has the highest profile among these, which does not mean that it has effective reach. It can look at a problem, send a team, recommend action to the host government, and then at most recommend suspension of the country concerned from the Commonwealth.

At the moment Pakistan and Zimbabwe stand suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth, a kind of half-way suspension house. They remain members, but cannot participate in decision-making bodies.

These can hardly be decisions that improve human rights anyway. "The Harare declaration refers to a broader concept of human rights, but to date CMAG has mostly been concerned with ensuring formal democracy, with its focus on the unconstitutional overthrow

The Commonwealth has several groups in place to tackle human rights abuses. None is particularly effective by itself; nor are the lot together, for that matter.

of a democratically elected government," Clare Doube from the New Delhi-based Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) told Terra Viva.

"Ideally CMAG should also look at the more substantive aspects of democratic functioning of its member states, including the value they place on protecting and promoting human rights," Doube says. "Formal exercise of voting rights is not determinative of the fundamental freedoms enjoyed by a population."

The Human Rights Unit, Doube says, comprises just two programme officers and an administration person. "More resources should be dedicated to their work," she says. The third mechanism, the technical cooperation fund, has seen its budget slashed by 40 percent in 1990 (it is 23 million pounds for 2003-04).

The Commonwealth also promotes human rights through the Commonwealth Foundation and the civil society organisations it supports. Many of these play an active role in supporting human rights.

"But there is a great deal of room for improvement and innovation in all that the Commonwealth does," says Doube. "The Commonwealth has made a number of commitments to human rights over a number of decades, but has no system in place for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of these commitments. The Commonwealth is strewn with paper promises."

Human rights activists within the Commonwealth propose improvements along several lines:

- The creation of a Commonwealth human rights commissioner mandated to promote, protect and monitor human

rights, give advice, and make recommendations.

- The creation of a human rights adviser to CMAG, to work like rapporteurs with the United Nations. An adviser such as a recently retired Supreme Court judge could provide evidence prior to CMAG meetings, and assist governments running into trouble or emerging from CMAG suspension.

- More generally human rights could be supported through an environment that promotes open governance. This would mean implementation of comprehensive information access and disclosure policies.

The non-governmental Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative set up in 1987 with support from associations like those of Commonwealth journalists, broadcasters, trade unions, parliamentarians and others has been working largely on policy level advocacy, and some educational ventures.

The Forum that the CHRI is organising in Abuja will now "bring together many different organisations that have never come together before," Doube says. "It should result in the creation of a new network, and should be a good kick in the right direction. The CHRI will be the secretariat of that network."

The outcome of the two-day meeting will be fed to CHOGM that gets going the day after the CHRI forum concludes. Commonwealth leaders have been listening to human rights noises for long. The CHRI is hoping that this move will be a little noisier, and lead to a little more action.

Leaders will be on watch particularly over action they take over human rights abuses in Pakistan and Zimbabwe.

Hard Days in Zimbabwe

By Chris Msipa

HARARE: ZIMBABWE IS winding up another bitter year, and Samson Tawona, a teacher in the capital – Harare – is a depressed man.

"Prices of essential goods – food, soap, fuel, you name it – are going up almost every hour. Buy a bar of soap for one amount in the morning (and) when you go to the same supermarket at lunch, the price will be higher," he says.

Hundreds, if not thousands of Zimbabwe's young, educated nationals have gone abroad, and most of those who remain at home are an angry lot. Their country is enduring its worst economic and political crisis since independence in 1980.

Dozens of human rights activists and trade unionists were arrested in various parts of Zimbabwe last week to prevent them from staging protests against human rights abuses – and the deteriorating economic situation.

This follows two mass arrests on Oct. 22, when members of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) gathered in support of calls for a new constitution.

Last month, Zimbabwe's sole privately-owned daily – the Daily News

– was shut down again after it made a brief reappearance on the streets of the capital.

Prior to this, the paper had been closed for about two months under the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which requires all journalists and news organisations to register with a state commission. Freedom of speech groups have denounced the act as a bid to muzzle the press.

Zimbabwe is also experiencing severe food shortages attributed to drought and mismanagement of the land redistribution process. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 5.5 million people will require food aid in the course of 2004. The UN Human Development Report for this year puts Zimbabwe's population at around 13 million.

To date, efforts to provide emergency assistance have been marred by allegations that the ruling ZANU-PF party is manipulating food aid for political ends.

At the beginning of August, authorities in Harare said they would restrict non-governmental organisations (NGO's) from distributing supplies. The government later softened its approach,

telling donor countries that it would not intervene in distribution.

Nonetheless, the international sanctions imposed on President Robert Mugabe's government to bring about a change in policy are receiving little support from some in the country.

Samson Tawona vehemently criticises these so-called "smart sanctions", which are meant to target Mugabe, as well as some members of his government and ZANU-PF.

His colleague, Zebon Madunge, agrees. "Those sanctions are hurting us, the general public," he says, "They are not upsetting the government as planned. It is now clear they (Western powers) wanted to drive us into (a) frenzy (to) remove Mugabe, to make way for Morgan (Tsvangirai) of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC."

"That (is) a silly and dangerous dream. This government adopted, mastered and perfected one of the most ruthless laws in the world," says Madunge. "The Law and Order Maintenance Act, LOMA, of the 1970s – now the Public Order and Security Act – is a very effective weapon to silence opposition and protests. 'Order' is the word." But there are increasing signs of anger against 'orders'.

Double Test for Twin Goals

ZIMBABWEAN PRESIDENT Robert Mugabe will not be in Abuja, he has not been invited after Zimbabwe was suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth. Nor will Gen Pervaiz Musharraf, now president of Pakistan. But human rights abuses in both countries will be on the agenda in Abuja.

A report from the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) will be presented to the heads of governments. But they can of course discuss Zimbabwe without reference to the CMAG report.

The human rights issues in Pakistan and Zimbabwe bring together civil society and government. And they put to immediate test the declared Commonwealth principles of promoting democracy and development.

The discussions have been given edge by the arrest of several trade union leaders in Harare. The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights has documented the arrests and made strong complaints over the violation of rights, capping the economic crisis and sharp deterioration in living standards.

The International Bar Association voiced concern over the arrest of hundreds of peaceful protesters, even though charges were later dropped. These complaints are being taken to governments directly. Civil society and human rights groups have also been hammering away at governments in recent weeks.

Abuja will be a test of the extent to which governments respond to these complaints.

Continued suspension of Zimbabwe and Pakistan will be the thorniest political agenda at CHOGM. It is an area also of prime concern to human rights organizations as they seek to make good governance synonymous with human rights.

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) has urged the Commonwealth to remain firm in keeping Zimbabwe suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth. That kind of suspension means that the Pakistani and Zimbabwean flags will be flying at Abuja. And that's about all. Suspension from the councils of the Commonwealth means that the two remain members but cannot participate as members.

How far heads of government go beyond mere statements in support of democracy and development will be indicated in good measure by positions they take on Pakistan and Zimbabwe.

Today in Abuja

9.00 – 17.00

Commonwealth Civil Society Meeting on Development and Democracy

Yar'Adua Centre Auditorium
Organised by the Commonwealth Foundation [Invitation Only]

9.00 – 13.00

Harmful Traditional Practices and HIV/AIDS

Yar'Adua Centre Boardroom
Organised by the Tabitha Infirmity Foundation

17.30 – 19.00

Forum Reports

Yar'Adua Centre Auditorium
Organised by Commonwealth Foundation

19.30 – 21.00

"Nigeria Night" – the State of Civil Society in Nigeria

Yar'Adua Centre Auditorium

9.00 – 17.00

Democracy and Development in the Commonwealth

Protea Hotel Hall A
Organised by Centre for Democracy and Development

14.00 – 17.00

Transitions to Peace

Protea Hotel Hall C
Organised by Civil Society Movement of Sierra Leone

14.00 – 17.00

Special Session: Land Management. Workshops on Themes Related to CIRADIS

Rockview Hotel
Organised by Commonwealth Foundation

Performances at the Commonwealth Market

14.00 – 15.00

Afri Theatre
Book Recital by Dr. Emeka Nwakpu

16.00 – 16.30

Koroso Dance Group

16.45 – 17.15

Ayo Bankole and Asha Band

17.45 – 18.15

Classical Music Performance by Impact Consult

18.45 – 19.30

Madojazz Ensemble of South Africa



Getting all set for the Commonwealth People's Forum

People's Forum Gets Going

By Toye Olori

NIGERIAN PRESIDENT Olusegun Obasanjo opened the Commonwealth Peoples Forum Sunday. Cultural displays marked the colourful occasion.

Colin Ball, director of the Commonwealth Foundation that has organized the people's forum called on participants to make best use of the opportunity.

"The week ahead is an opportunity for many things to happen, an opportunity that comes only once every two years," he said. "We must use it to the full, and above all we must do so by giving voice to the people we all serve and reciprocally by hearing and learning from the voices of others across communities, across cultures, across genders, across generations across faiths and across nations."

Ball thanked the Nigerian government for helping set up the magnificent facilities. "These facilities and the efforts that have brought them about were a real credit to this great country and its great people."

Nkoyo Toyo, chairperson of the Committee on the Forum, called on Obasanjo to press leaders at the Abuja summit to work for a progressive partnership between civil societies and governments.

"In furtherance of this aspirations, we are not in doubt that as you take over the leadership of the Commonwealth you will demonstrate and work to expand in many ways the context and scope of the partnership," she said.

She said that the venue of the Commonwealth Peoples Market with its 81 shops set in typical Nigerian village hut style is symbolic. The venue is a message also to other peoples across the world who make their livelihood in villages and markets, she said.

Culture and tourism minister Frank Ogbuewu praised the organisers for providing the opportunity for the Commonwealth communities to meet and exchange views while the Commonwealth heads of government are in session.

Ogbuewu told the gathering: "Here at the Commonwealth Market you will be exposed to the experiences and achievement on the dynamic network of people to provide the platform where the civil society and officials of the Commonwealth can interact and exchange views of common interest. It has been established to serve as a forum for cultural, entertainment and exhibitions of arts and craft."

The minister spoke of Nigeria's enormous tourism potential and

urged visitors to the Abuja CHOGM to return to Nigeria for relaxation and to establish business ties. And, he added, marriages so that better international relationships can be established.

Bashir El-Rufai, minister of the federal capital territory Abuja said the forum is expected

to showcase the vast cultural and commercial potentials of the Commonwealth member states and their readiness for globalisation through the Commonwealth market. He urged all participants to avail themselves of the investment climate in Nigeria.

He praised the contributions of civil society organizations and other similar national and international organisations for their untiring efforts to support the commonwealth of nations. "The role of these organisations in strengthening our democracy and development and the awareness that they raise in their activities in various areas, from health to education, women's rights and HIV/AIDS must be commended," he said.

The village where the market has been set up makes a particularly picturesque site. The huts with their traditional thatched roofs seek to give the feel of the village, and men and women in traditional costumes complete the traditional touch.

Yes, Gov'ts Are Listening

ROSETTA THOMPSON is beginning to see hope where she did not expect to. Civil society is rising in activity and profile in West Africa a little quicker than anyone could have thought.

Thompson is with the Pan African Institute for Development West Africa based in Cameroon. That makes it one of four such regional institutions in Africa that are working for capacity building, she says.

Capacity building means training, and building skills and knowledge in areas of development work of all kinds. Not work that is best done in isolation. Thompson is now working with other institutions for a West Africa network where civil society organizations (CSOs) can work together.

"The first thing people need is the building of their capacity to contribute to development and democracy," she says. "They must come to this issue from an informed background. Before people can realize their potential, they

need to be able to build up their skills and knowledge base."

In recognition of the contribution that civil society can make to this process, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has invited civil society leaders to a conference in Accra in Ghana later this month.

"That is really unusual," says Felicity Daly from the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW). The ICSW is an international organisation with about 80 CSO members in 70 countries. Six of these groups are in the central and western African region, Thompson's group among them.

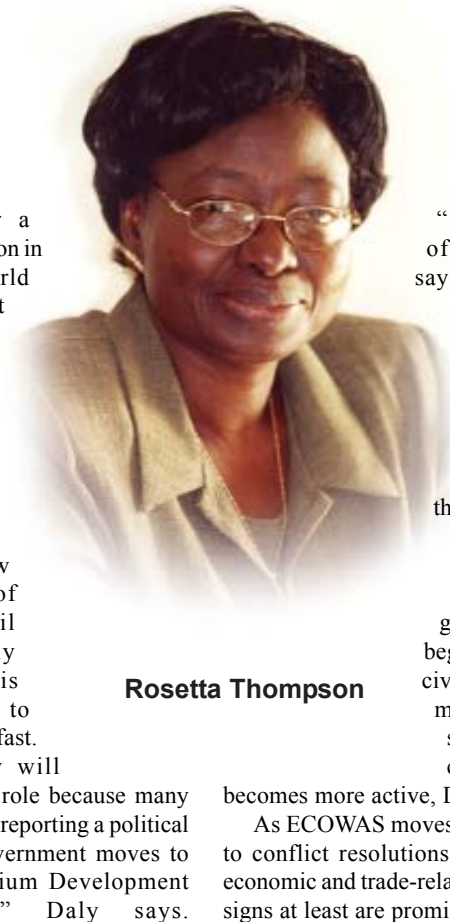
"The ECOWAS meeting with civil society was their initiative, and this sort of thing does not usually happen," Daly says. That puts ECOWAS a step ahead of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The ICSW has been given funding by the British and the Danish

governments for a Regional Cooperation in a Globalising World Project. The project aims to build up relationships between civil society groups and regional inter-governmental organizations.

If the new response of ECOWAS to civil society is any indication, this relationship is set to grow, and to grow fast.

"Civil society will have an important role because many of our members are reporting a political agenda behind government moves to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs," Daly says.



Rosetta Thompson

"Government officials do not say how they are performing, and civil society can become another lens to look at this work through."

Governments and inter-governmental groups are beginning to take civil society very much more seriously as civil society becomes more active, Daly says.

As ECOWAS moves from attention to conflict resolutions towards more economic and trade-related matters, the signs at least are promising.

Around Abuja

ABUJA WILL find out one day no doubt, that there is a CHOGM on. When?

Some companies that do business in Lagos and beyond have put up billboards in town saying something about CHOGM, and of course themselves. So that's about half a dozen interested managers. Which leaves Abuja almost entirely out.

And if the government is excited about CHOGM, it's not showing. A measure of this excitement can't be just a certain billboard population. But there is very little indication on the streets this way or another that anyone cares. Abuja is not hosting CHOGM, it is only a location where some meetings will happen in a few buildings over a few days.

Given its stage of development, and the pervasive lack of it, Abuja is a challenge to the Commonwealth. An Abuja that doesn't care says the Commonwealth is not touching the lives of those it needs to.

And what of the people's forum? Abuja seems to know of that even less.

This is just Abuja. That still leaves another two billion people or so.

LEADERS OF governments, of business, of civil society will all talk this week at length on corruption, how it saps the economy, hurts the people, weakens governments and what not. And they will all be right.

Tried changing money in Abuja? Then you probably know that little square with all the shops. A good rate here, and good service. You don't have to enter the shops, the money is brought to the waiting cars.

That there are so many shops is also reassuring in a sense, it means the spirit of competition is strong in this 'other' market. So the rate people get is close to the 'real' market rate.

It's not that different outside this market. The hotels where so many Commonwealth visitors are staying offer to change money, and do not always offer receipts. We will talk corruption this week after emptying several bottles of clean drinking water bought with unclean money.

'NINE-ELEVEN' is of course a milestone in the history books of the future. But there is one corner of Abuja that was never affected by it. At least it remained unaffected in a rather unique manner.

The 9-11 restaurant got its name long before that event of 2001. "My reason for this name was very simple," says restaurant owner Nawab, who migrated to Nigeria from India to offer a touch of old Mughal dishes with a touch of more West African flavours. "My restaurant opens from nine in the morning to 11 at night, so I called it 9-11."

And did he think of changing the name two years ago? "Why should I? My opening hours haven't changed."

Fine. Except that there is a discomfiting touch of anger in a disregard for that date. How much remains not common.