

## An agreed civil society statement



*“This Technical Working Group meeting demonstrated the power of collaborative facilitation at its best – the combined skills of an external and our internal facilitators delivered exactly what was needed, on time.”*

Guy Holloway, Program Officer Commonwealth Foundation London<sup>1</sup>.

In his reflection on the way the formal dialogue between Commonwealth civil society organizations and Foreign Ministers at CHOGM had changed over time the Commonwealth Foundation Director Vijay Krishnarayan wrote: *“The dialogue that took place this year was different and it provides guidance for the next set piece – which poetically will take place in Malta in 2015.”*

## The power of collaborative facilitation

Martin Farrell

### Under pressure to deliver



The Commonwealth Foundation staff team were under intense pressure. The Commonwealth People’s Forum (CPF<sup>2</sup>) which was to immediately precede the CHOGM<sup>3</sup>(Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) in Sri Lanka in November 2013, was seen to be a significant and timely opportunity for the Commonwealth Foundation to present a strong voice for civil society in the Commonwealth.

In the run up to the CHOGM meeting a lively dialogue had been raging about the place of the Commonwealth and its institutions. It was in this fast changing and turbulent atmosphere that the Commonwealth Foundation was making its preparations for the meeting – knowing that the outcome would be closely scrutinized for years to come.

The experience of the dialogues at previous CHOGMs was seen as having been less than satisfactory with civil society presentations being disparate and the ministers being skeptical about the credibility of the civil society proponents across the table. The Foundation had an ambition to make the dialogue at this 2013 CHOGM very different, so there would be a lot riding on the outcome of the Technical Working Group (TWG<sup>4</sup>) meeting six weeks previously.

The Foundation decided that “an independent professional facilitator” was going to be needed to work alongside staff as internal facilitators to facilitate the TWG

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<sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth represents civil society organizations in Commonwealth countries whilst its larger sister organization, the Commonwealth Secretariat, represents governments.

<sup>2</sup> The CPF takes place over the days immediately before the CHOGM.

<sup>3</sup> The CHOGM takes place every two years each time hosted by a different Commonwealth country.

<sup>4</sup> The TWG consisting of participants from civil society organizations from Africa, Asia and Small States .

meeting. They knew they needed the extra focus and energy of someone who knew how to navigate through tricky dynamics under pressure.

Following several discussions, my engagement was confirmed some ten days before the TWG session.

The Commonwealth Foundation team and I knew each other from an earlier session I had facilitated. So they knew my style and we had already begun to develop the mutual trust and respect which then proved to be a sound foundation for our subsequent collaboration. Our personal commitment to work together was as binding as the subsequent formal contract.

Therefore when we met the day before the session we stayed focused in the moment, worked with what we had and thereby further built our mutual trust.

We were as prepared as we could be to meet the challenges of the coming days.

### **By the end of the TWG ...**



It had been agreed with the client that, by the end of the three day TWG session, participants would have:

- articulated recommendations, including both global and regional perspectives, which will be presented to senior officials.
- decided by whom and how they will be presented to the Conference of the Whole (COW<sup>5</sup>) so that they are clear, compelling and readily understood.
- made suggestions about the process of CPF and what preparatory steps could be taken to prepare for it.

### **Inviting the spirit of genuine community**



Our task at a facilitator team was to breathe life, in the moment, to the outline agenda which had previously been circulated. By responding to the demands of the moment and focusing on the purpose of the meeting, we sought to create a spirit of genuine community working together with common purpose.

We had developed a program the flow of which was:



- opening/inviting participation organizational context of the meeting.
- providing information about the global context.
- generating responses from constituents' perspective.
- distilling and refining.

<sup>5</sup> COW consisting of senior officials representing each Head of State, the COW is responsible for preparing for the CHOGM

- agreeing and capturing.
- preparing to present.

**Day 1:** Although some participants knew each other, others did not and many were tired having recently arrived from various time zones. Acknowledging these facts helped us quickly get to the point at which the group was engaged and ready to work together.

Within an explicit spirit of inviting genuine community of purpose, the morning was given to providing information both about the significance of the meeting for civil society participation in the Commonwealth and to the global “Post-2015 Development agenda” of which it was playing a part. Frequent reference was made to the overall and indeed inspiring goal of bringing about positive change within civil society in Commonwealth countries.

In groups (Africa, Asia and Small states) participants digested all they had heard and a background document was considered “*What issues should be considered in the final presentation to the COW?*” All participants voted on *all* issues, each having votes for “shared themes” and “foundational issues” in addition to Africa, Asia and Small states. This, by the end of the first day, provided the material for a first iteration of the paper.

**Day 2** was given to agreeing who would present to the “COW” as well as how, and to refinement, with precise wording being passed to a participant who collated everything into its final draft format. This was completed by 5pm, allowing the following morning (**day 3**) for copy editing production of 100 copies and rehearsal by presenters.

At the end of the three day “Technical Working Group” (“TWG”) session the 20 participants had agreed and delivered a final draft of a seven page statement about civil society in the Commonwealth. They had also agreed which members of their group would make the presentation to the COW in front of more than 100 people in the formal surroundings of Marlborough House, a Royal Palace in London at the end of the final day of the session.

Having been accepted by the COW, the statement was to be presented back to civil society at CPF as one of the foundational documents to be built upon and reshaped before formally presented formally to the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Colombo, Sri Lanka some six weeks later.

### **All voices were heard**

The product of the session was a seven page statement agreed by all participants which was formally presented to the “COW”, as intended.



Beyond this tangible success there was a less tangible outcome which was evident to all involved in the formal evening reception after the COW presentation and during the days following the meeting; the meeting had helped spark a spirit of optimism about the potential for productive dialogue about civil society within the Commonwealth.

Participants knew that the meeting had helped create the conditions for a step change in the way the voice of the peoples of the Commonwealth could be heard within the formal institutions of the Commonwealth. This indeed became evident subsequently in the CHOGM in Sri Lanka.

Time will tell what significance the civil society statement, prepared by the TWG will have had. This one meeting may be long remembered as a moment in time which contributed to the way the people of the Commonwealth can make their voices heard.

To complete the process, I met virtually a month later with the internal facilitator team to review and learn. This TWG meeting was done but it was one step in a long process.

### **Trusting each other and the power of collaboration**



Whilst working with others calls for a willingness to discover and accommodate to the facilitation styles of others, this challenge is more than outweighed by the benefits of being part of a team. For example I was pleased to be able to pass the lead to another team member during the voting on points to include in the report; internal knowledge of substantive issues was valuable, maybe essential at this point. Also after I had been pushing the process hard on the



second day, a team member was there to take over at the end of the day to change the pace and to help the group go slower and digest the day's efforts.

Throughout the three days we always made it clear to everyone who was in the lead; this is one way of creating safety which is essential for participation.

- Participation was an essential ingredient of our successfully creating a report, agreed by the diverse voices in the room, under significant time pressure.
- The way the facilitation team modelled collaboration helped to create a working environment in which all could succeed.