

18 November 2007, Sunday 18:00  
Rt Hon Don McKinnon, Commonwealth Secretary-General  
Opening ceremony, Commonwealth People's Forum  
Kampala, Uganda

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Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to join you for the opening of the 2007 Commonwealth Peoples' Forum.

If your theme is 'Realising people's potential', then tonight we have seen - and no doubt we will see - that the sky is the limit for our Ugandan entertainers. We warmly thank them, and all our Ugandan hosts.

Tonight and the next three days will look further at potential realised – and potential that still needs to be unlocked and released.

But let us make our celebrations before we lay down our challenges.

I celebrate the People's Forum, 10 years old this year. How far you have come since that inaugural success at the Edinburgh CHOGM...! Of the 250 civil society organisations that are here in Kampala, only 25 bear the name Commonwealth. I view that as testimony to the strength of Commonwealth civil society, that peers outside our immediate family recognise it, and seek to associate themselves with it. Some 20 or so non-Commonwealth organisations worldwide are now formally accredited to us, and we welcome the experience that bodies like CIVICUS (the World Alliance for Citizen Participation) can bring to us – and we to them.

I also celebrate the boldness and the vision of this Forum, and the quality of the programme you have put together for the next few days. From environment, to governance, to trade, to education, to health, to culture – you are painting on a large canvas.

This Forum's creativity expands by the CHOGM: your 'Learning Journeys' this year – offering visitors first-hand experience of civil society in action for the good of humankind here in Uganda – reinforce our Commonwealth belief that for all the excellence and reach of our *policy* work, there is nothing quite like the *practical* work we do on the ground when it comes to bettering people's lives. I hope to leave some sort of creative imprint – if only in the form of a large and colourful graffiti – in your People's Space, another novel and challenging idea you have brought to this year's People's Forum.

Let me also acknowledge the Commonwealth Foundation, which for over 40 years now has coached and coaxed the voice of civil society in the

Commonwealth – amplifying it, moderating it, helping it find new pitch and tone. Under Professor Guido de Marco, Dr Mark Collins and their talented team, the Foundation is now empowering thousands of Commonwealth citizens.

The Foundation is a source of grant money – but it is much more. They lead in their field. The project they conceived to build human rights capacity in the British Overseas Territories of the Caribbean and South Atlantic is just one example. From modest resources, they generate real policy power and real convening power.

But above all, tonight we celebrate civil society at large. We often talk about the Commonwealth as an alliance of Governments and Peoples. Perhaps we are making needless distinctions: governments, after all, are the representatives of the people, and in democracies people have a say in how they are governed. If I value democracy then I value people, and it follows that I value civil society as being – so often – a direct and authentic voice of the people, and a vehicle for conveying their most real, their most immediate, their most local interests.

We should celebrate civil society's capacity to protest, and to cajole, and to criticise, and to hold accountable – just as we should applaud its capacity to thank, to lend support to government initiatives, to take part in them, to be objective and apolitical. Civil society must find that balance, and to be responsible, informed and accountable in doing so. These are not aspirations but values: this is what Commonwealth members sign up to.

I welcome civil society's involvement in the strategic work of the wider Commonwealth, and particularly its inter-governmental work. Just look at the way our education civil society organisations galvanised our Commonwealth Education Ministers in Cape Town last December. They fought hard to encourage schools links, and to have the Commonwealth and its values taught as part of any curriculum. Or look at the way that Commonwealth Meteorologists, Planners and Foresters lobbied our Environment Ministers meeting to orchestrate our response to climate change in Nairobi this February. Or look at the way Commonwealth civil society has contributed to our vital work on understanding and resolving tensions, and building communities.

Your organisations are in good health, and they play a key role in our organisation. They are the envy of others: I often repeat the episode when Boutros Boutros Ghali, then head of La Francophonie, told me how much he admired the strength of the Commonwealth's civil society network.

But have we come all the way to Uganda merely to celebrate these good things?

Of course not. We are here to square up to the massive challenges within our Commonwealth – of poverty, ignorance, disease, discrimination. These are

challenges to civil society and to government, because they affect us all, wherever we are. And we are *all* part of the solution.

The subtext of this year's *Forum* theme, of 'Realising People's Potential', is that not nearly enough people are making the best of their natural talent and their natural aspiration.

And the subtext of the *CHOGM* theme, of 'Transforming Societies to achieve political, economic and human development', is that we are not doing so, sufficiently well for all.

Let me say very quick things about both of those themes.

First, the Forum theme. The Commonwealth is largely about raising the potential of those who need it most: women, young people, poor people, people on the margins of our societies.

Take young people: nearly half of our Commonwealth is under 25, yet 70 million of our Commonwealth children have never seen the inside of a school.

Take women: half the people on this planet bear considerably more than half of its problems. The figure is, in fact, two-thirds, for girls out of school, those in poverty, those with AIDS.

Take minority groups; take those made social outcasts by AIDS: these and so many other groups are what I mean by 'those who need us most'.

So much of the Commonwealth's inter-governmental work is directed at these people, and so much of yours, too.

Second, the CHOGM theme: a question posed to us by President Museveni. Just *how*, he asks us, do we 'transform societies to achieve political, economic and human development'? Why are a quarter of our Commonwealth members in the bottom quartile of the UN's Human Development Index, and a further third of them below the median?

Some will offer economic theory in response, knowing that nothing transforms and inspires and unleashes potential like economic growth, and above all trade. But the Commonwealth vision goes further. It is based on the simple premise that a truly transformed society is one which is understood and supported by all of its citizens, and which benefits them all individually and collectively. Transformation is above all about people – and it is about democracy and governance. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is where civil society comes in. A lively civil society is a fundamental part of a transformed society. You can't have one without the other.

Over the past two decades, the rise of civil society as a social and political force in individual countries, and trans-nationally, has been a huge part of the spread of democracy. In fact, it has been part of its inspiration. Voluntary action by individual citizens, acting in the public good, is part of democracy in action, and long may it continue.

Commonwealth Heads of Government said as much just two years ago at the Malta CHOGM. I quote: they 'acknowledged the contribution of civil society'; they 'urged civil society to be pro-active'; they 'supported the mainstreaming of civil society in all Commonwealth activities'.

I always recall that an excellent Commonwealth civil society organisation working on HIV and AIDS was even named after a paragraph in the 1999 Durban Communique – 'Paragraph 55' is their name.

So civil society is part of the solution. That is why we value you so highly.

What I say is far better put in your own, very colourful, creative and expressive, People's Forum postcards. Yours is the loudhailer directed at Government. What you say here in this Forum matters hugely to the outcome of this Commonwealth week.

I wish you lively and successful discussions, and look forward to being able to respond to them.

Thank you.

**ENDS**