

Ninth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting

*"Gender Issues in Economic Crisis, Recovery and Beyond:
Women as Agents of Transformation"*

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MID-TERM REVIEW OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS' IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMONWEALTH PLAN OF ACTION FOR GENDER EQUALITY *(Paper prepared by the Commonwealth Foundation)*

INTERIM REPORT

Commonwealth Secretariat
Lloyd Erskine Sandiford Centre
Barbados
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2010 is a key year for the promotion of gender equality and rights in the Commonwealth. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted in 1995. Combined, these documents seek to identify and rectify institutional, political and material imbalances that isolate gender concerns from national development planning. The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 (GPoA) provides the framework for Commonwealth countries to engage with these global processes, recognising that achieving social, economic and political development depends upon realising gender equality.

The purpose of the Mid-Term Review (MTR) is to assess civil society engagement with the GPoA. This interim report is a summary of actions taken and results obtained so far, for presentation to Women’s Affairs Ministers at their meeting in Barbados. A full and final Review, including final conclusions and recommendations, will be published and distributed soon after 9th WAMM.

REVIEW OF COMMONWEALTH FOUNDATION SUPPORT TO THE GPoA

Grant-making Activities

Over the past five years, the allocation of Commonwealth Foundation grants to civil society organisations that promote gender equality amounts to approximately £600,000 (see interim figures below).

Results Table 1: Grant-making in the area of gender equality

Financial Year	Grant Amount allocated
2005-2006	£74,580
2006-2007	£63,237
2007-2008	£200,917
2008-2009	£165,347
2009-2010 (committed funds)	£100,000 to date

Over the past five years, the Foundation has supported over 100 organisations, including the Commonwealth Women’s Network. Further details of these and other awards will be presented in the final report.

Programme Support

In addition, the Commonwealth Foundation’s own Programme of Work has achieved a wide range of contributions to the achievement of the Plan of Action. These include gender activities in the areas of capacity building, advocacy, human rights and law, cultural awareness, gender-based violence, poverty eradication and economic empowerment, HIV and AIDS, maternal health, disability, faith, and respect and understanding.

The Foundation supports a wide range of Commonwealth associations and networks including the Commonwealth Women’s Network (CWN). A recent review concluded that women’s organisations wanted a stronger Commonwealth network. They asked the Foundation for funding for core costs and for activities to implement the Gender Plan of Action, which the Foundation has provided. In addition to the CWN, the Foundation supports other Commonwealth associations involved in implementing activities relevant to the GPoA, for example the Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association.

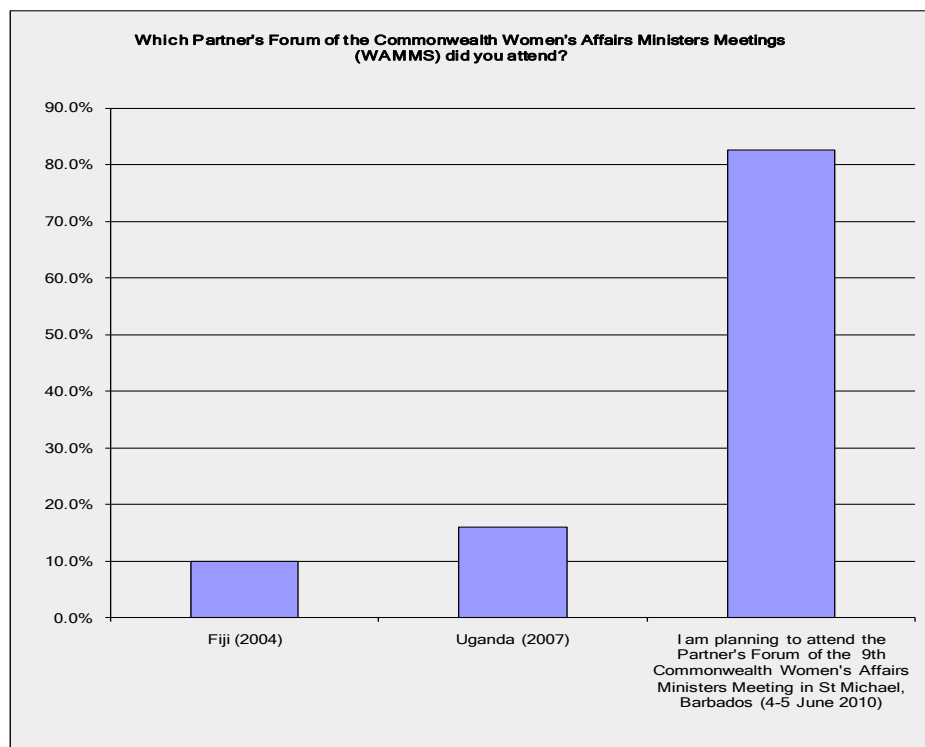
Lessons learned from the Mid-Term Review will be applied to future grant-making and programme development.

REVIEW OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS’ SUPPORT TO THE GPoA

Introduction

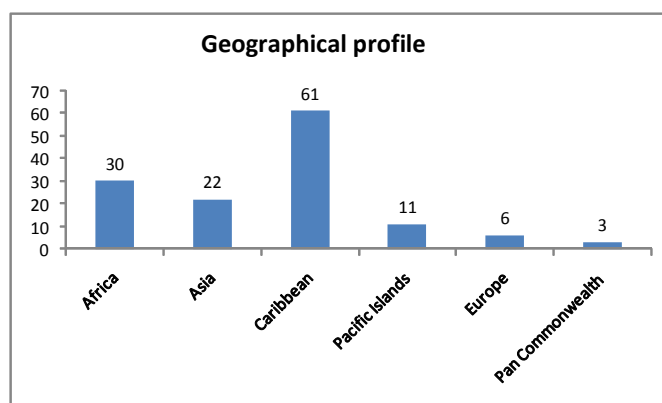
A Survey to capture the views of civil society participants to 7WAMM and 8WAMM, and to those who attended civil society consultations for the November 2009 Commonwealth People’s Forum held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago was distributed in February 2010. A total of 166 respondents, from 28 Commonwealth countries have completed the Survey. The response rate to the Survey was encouraging. Out of a total of 166 respondents, 58% completed the Survey in its entirety, and many respondents intended to join the Partners Forum at 9th WAMM.

Results Table 2: Respondents attendance at WAMM

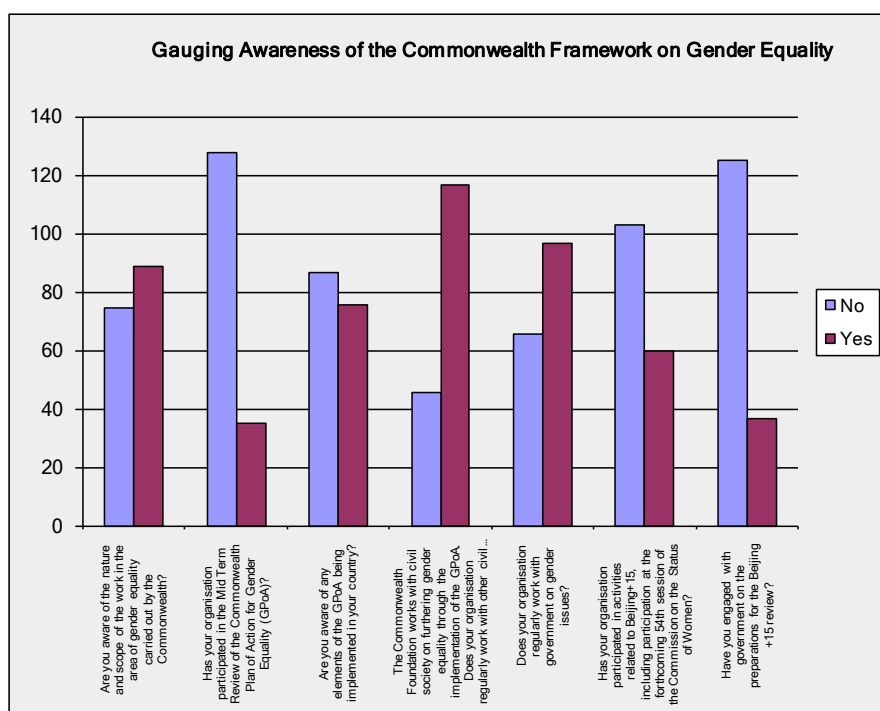


Broadly, 46% of respondents were from the Caribbean region, 22.5% from Africa, 16.5% from Asia and 8.2% from the Pacific Islands.

Results Table 3: Geographical distribution of respondents



Results Table 4: Gauging awareness of the GPoA



In terms of understanding the thematic issues contained in the Survey, only 55% of respondents were aware of the nature and scope of the work on gender issues carried out in the Commonwealth, and under half (47%) were aware of elements of the GPoA being implemented at the national level. Nearly 80% of those surveyed have this knowledge in part because they regularly work and collaborate with other national and regional civil society organisations. Some respondents said all four areas of the GPoA are being promoted by their organisation, while nearly an equal number were unsure of which areas they supported, or whether the work they engage in falls under any of the areas. This tells us that governments have worked towards mainstreaming gender, but work on gender equality has many dimensions, not all of which are specifically linked to the GPoA or the Commonwealth,

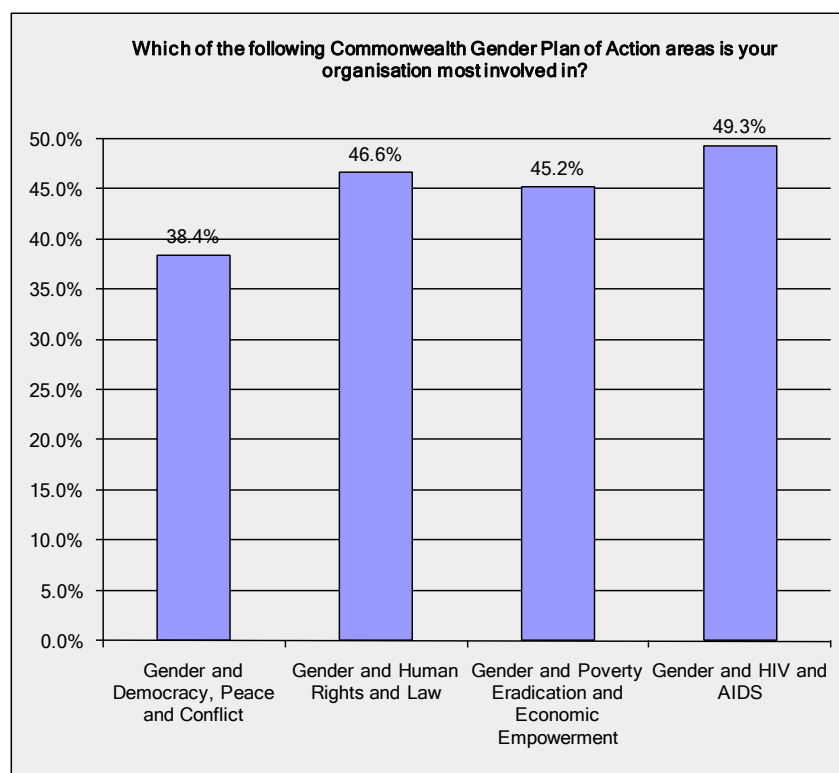
but to the global mandates such as regional platforms for action and the Millennium Development Goals.

Some respondents feel implementation towards the GPoA does not go into depth on other critical areas of issues on women and gender, such as the rights of the girl child, maternal health, the illegal narcotics trade, migration and issues related to forced displacement, women's economic rights, and food and water security.

While less than 20 % of those surveyed have participated, or collaborated with their national women's machineries on the Mid Term Review of the GPoA, 63% of respondents have participated in activities related to the Beijing +15. Nearly 80% of the civil society organisations surveyed said they did not work with their governments on this activity, although 56% of respondents say they do regularly engage with government on issues of gender equality. This is an important concern for the Commonwealth in general. The issue of the applicability, promotion and implementation of the global UN documents, such as the Beijing Platform and CEDAW, versus recognition of the work of the Commonwealth, was debated at the Annual Meeting of the Commonwealth National Women's Machineries in February of this year. It is clear that civil society and governments feel that UN documents constitute the primary mandate, and national development policy tends to fall in line with global processes.

Civil society works across all areas of action set out in the GPoA and the work they undertake often covers more than one action area. Of those surveyed, the largest number (49%) work on Gender and HIV and AIDS, followed by those working on Human Rights and the Law.

Results Table 5: Areas of the GPoA in which civil society organisations are involved



Civil Society and Access to Political and Policy Platforms

Civil society organisations, including the Commonwealth Women's Network, contributed to the formulation of the GPoA at the 7th Women's Affairs Ministerial Meetings (7WAMM) held in the Fiji Islands in 2004. At 8WAMM in 2007, again, the Foundation supported women's organisations to participate in discussions about development financing for women. These two examples demonstrate one of the Foundation's priority areas - to ensure the voice of civil society is heard at the highest level in Commonwealth Ministerial and Heads of Government meetings.

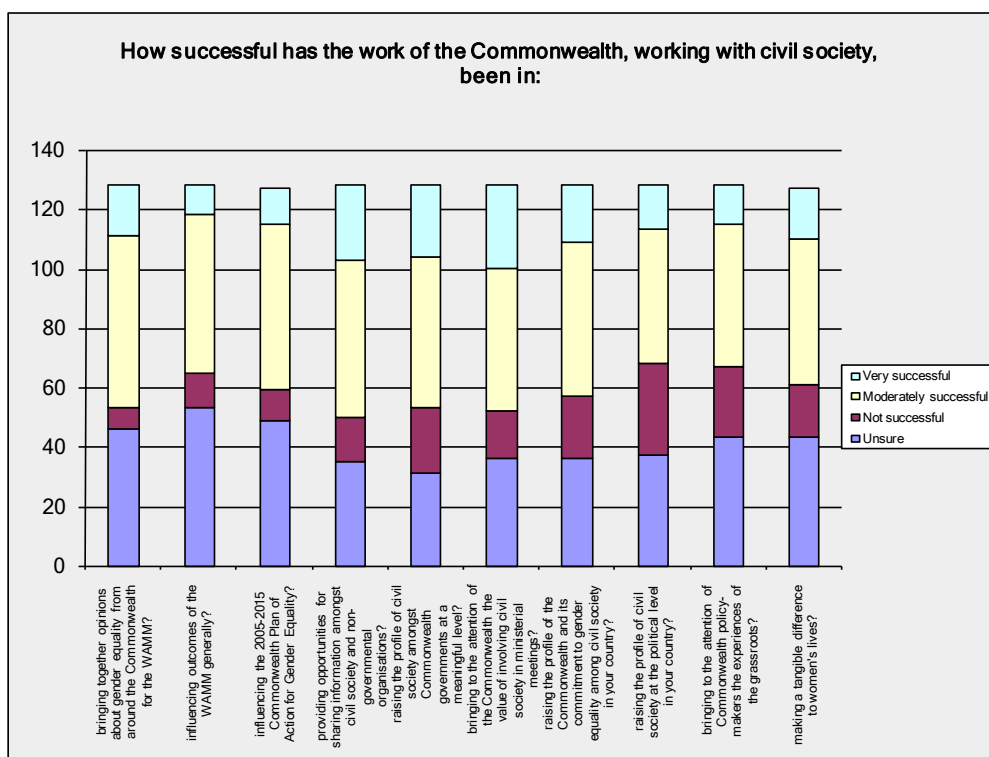
Civil society partnerships with Commonwealth governments are a key delivery mechanism for the targets set out in the Gender Plan of Action. In 2002, at their meeting in Coolum, Australia, Heads of Government adopted a High Level Group Report which established concise steps to build a strong and dynamic Commonwealth for the 21st century. They called on:

“the many intergovernmental, professional and civil society bodies which help us to implement our Commonwealth values, to join with us in building closer Commonwealth ‘family’ links, and strengthening consultation and collaboration. We are convinced of the need for stronger links and better two-way communication and coordination between the official and non-governmental Commonwealth, and among Commonwealth NGOs. This will give Commonwealth activities greater impact, ensuring that every programme produces lasting benefit” (Coolum Declaration, 2002).

In the spirit of the Coolum Declaration, civil society, over the years, has been granted wide access to Commonwealth Heads of Government and Ministerial Meetings. In particular, the WAMM has afforded civil society a unique opportunity to influence the outcome of the ministerial meetings, as well as to present their perspectives. The Foundation also helps civil society to participate in the meetings of Commonwealth Finance Ministers, Education Ministers, Health Ministers and Heads of Government, where the Commonwealth People's Forum takes place. In each of these meetings, the Foundation helps civil society to ensure that gender equality issues are addressed, often engaging gender experts to prepare papers and lead discussion. Civil society intervention in Commonwealth meetings has been effective in raising new and emerging issues, and Commonwealth Ministerial communiqués often pick up substantive civil society concerns.

In measuring the success of the Commonwealth in working in partnership with civil society on furthering gender equality, 50% of respondents characterised it as moderately successful, but primarily at the national or regional level where the Commonwealth hosts consultations. 41% felt civil society does influence (moderately) the outcomes of WAMM and 44% said it can influence the promotion and implementation of the GPoA. On this question, it is interesting to note the same number (41%) also felt unsure whether civil society could influence the outcome of the WAMM. 45% said the Commonwealth platforms provide opportunities for information sharing. While less than half of those surveyed (35%) feel the profile of civil society has been raised amongst governments in the Commonwealth, a nearly equal number feel more advocacy needs to be done, not just to implement the GPoA, but to raise the profile of civil society at a political level and bring to the attention of Commonwealth policymakers the experiences and expertise at the grassroots.

Results Table 6: Measures of success of working with civil society



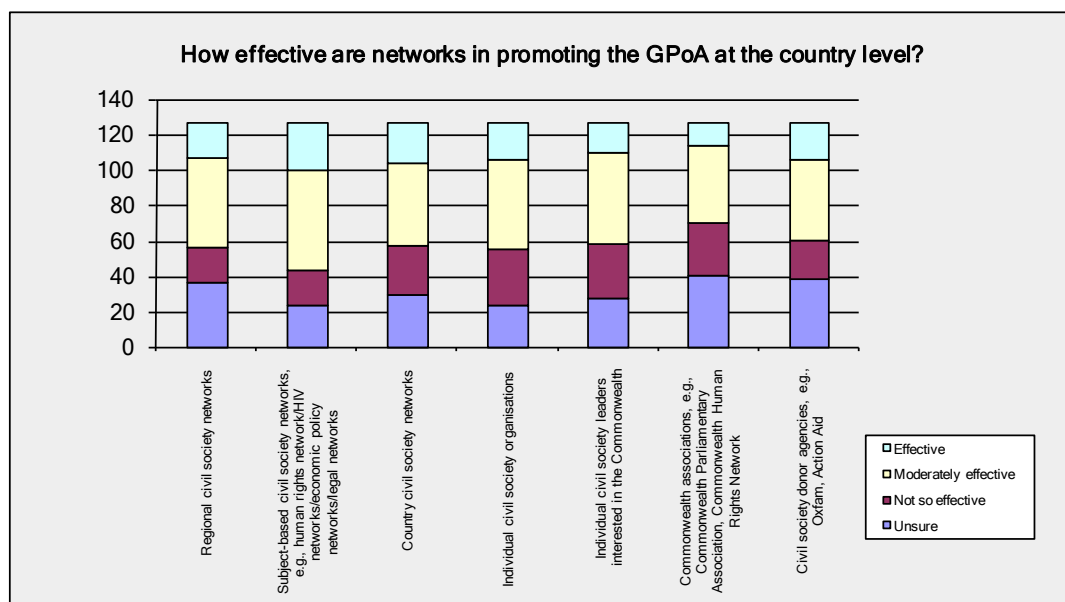
The most commonly cited reason for this is that civil society has made significant achievements, without the help of the Commonwealth, and in areas where there have been no gains made, it is because they feel governments are not doing enough to acknowledge or consider the work of civil society. Some respondents felt governments can be territorial, unaware of the work carried out at the grassroots and unsupportive, responding only to the big issues. There is a perception that sometimes only the most visible organisations get prominent attention at the Commonwealth Ministerial or Heads of Government meetings, and tend to dominate the proceedings. Some respondents feel civil society has less influence than in the past.

On the other hand, more visibility is now afforded to grassroots organisations, given there are more regional and international platforms for raising women's issues. Respondents cite reforms in the areas of education and health, human rights and the justice systems in their countries. Civil society in Uganda and Bangladesh cite instances of success in promoting gender equality within government agencies. In Tanzania and India, women have more access to political participation and civic engagement, particularly in local government. Gender-responsive national budgets in Samoa, and the formulation of a national policy directed at the promotion of gender equality in Belize are attributed by the respondents as indicative of the partnership between civil society and governments.

The majority of respondents value networks in the work they do and consider them to be an effective means of promoting and implementing the GPoA. Networks are an important way for smaller organisations to access broader regional and Commonwealth-wide platforms. Networks are also critical in forming a link between Commonwealth institutions and other

development NGOs such as ActionAid and Oxfam which are familiar with the work carried out at the grassroots in Commonwealth countries. Some respondents feel there is a 'disconnect' between the work civil society does at the grassroots, and the priority areas of work of the Commonwealth Secretariat and Foundation, even though they share the same values. Communication and collaboration were often cited as good reasons for keeping networks and associations alive.

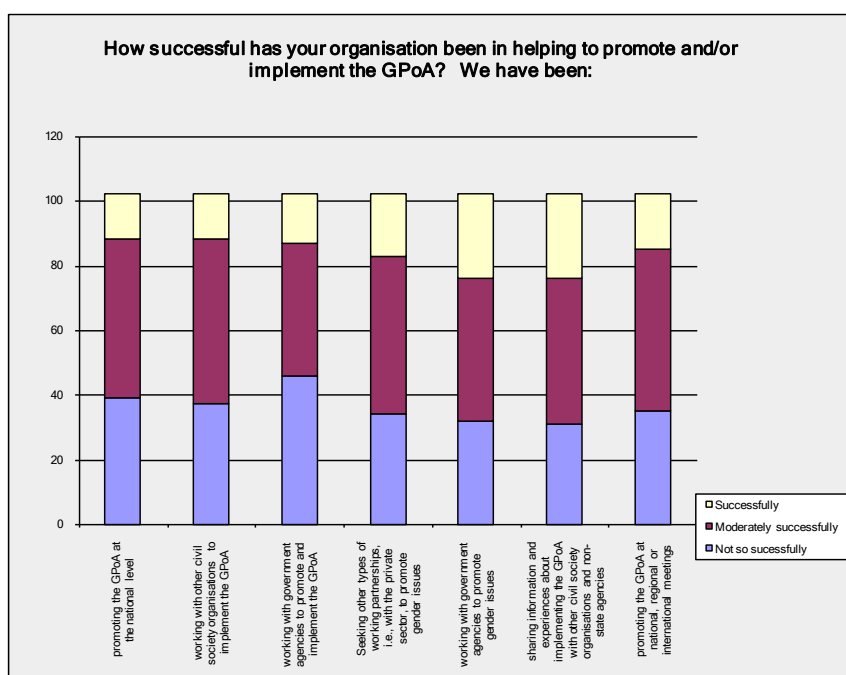
Results Table 7: Effectiveness of Networks in promoting the GPoA



Promoting and Implementing the GPoA: Enabling Environment

In the years immediately following the launch of the Commonwealth framework for gender equality, civil society and the Commonwealth Women's Network were mainly involved in influencing the WAMM, rather than in promoting or implementing its GPoA outcomes. This is changing, but civil society would like more opportunity to work with their own national government agencies in promoting issues of gender equality. Nearly 48% of those surveyed felt that they had some degree of success in promoting the GPoA, and a similar number (50%) found that working with other civil society partners was a help. 45% felt they had had little or no success in working with government specifically on the GPoA although, interestingly, 43% did say they have been moderately successful in working with government agencies on gender issues in general. Nearly 47% cited other working partnerships, such as with the private sector, as supportive of their work on gender equality. This is a sentiment characteristic of the dynamism of civil society, many of whom have said that to achieve a measure of success, they have had to be proactive to get their voices heard and further their agendas, which means seeking diverse technical and financial support. 49% felt they had made moderate gains in promoting the GPoA at regional or international meetings (compared with 34% who felt they had not).

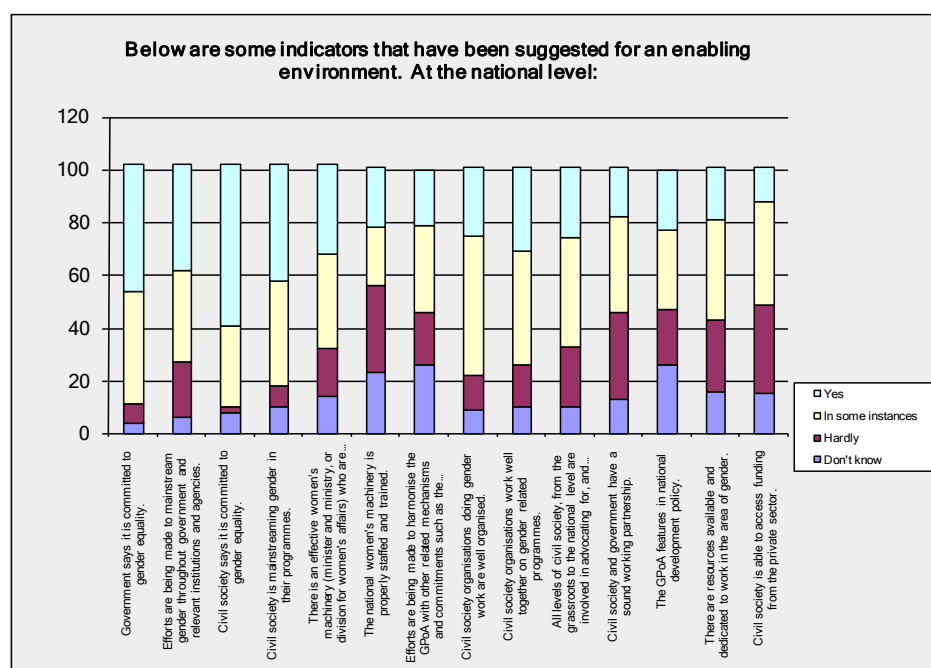
Results Table 8: Success in promoting and implementing the GPoA



When asked about the enabling environment for promoting and implementing work on gender, only 127 respondents attempted to answer the question. Many felt that only in some instances was there such an environment in place. A review of respondent profiles shows that only those civil society organisations which were in a position to do so in terms of visibility and access to Commonwealth platforms, answered this question. These include primarily civil society from the Caribbean region that contributed to the CPF assemblies, former members of CSAC and members of CWN.

Promotion of the Commonwealth framework for gender equality would need to be harmonised with existing policy and implementation of the Beijing+15, which guides the national development policy of most countries in the Commonwealth. Advocacy for gender equality using radio, television and new media, through regional networks, at universities, and through professional bodies such as Chambers of Commerce and Commonwealth Associations are just some of the ways the GPoA can be promoted nationally. Mainstreaming the GPoA in the programme components of civil society organisations will also help civil society work more effectively with governments.

Results Table 9: Indicators of an enabling environment



Approximately 89% of those who responded to this section felt that national governments were committed to gender quality and 73% felt that efforts were being made to mainstream gender concerns throughout governments and relevant institutions and agencies. The majority also felt civil society was doing the same within its own ambit, with an overwhelming 90% citing their commitment to gender equality, and 82% saying they were mainstreaming gender into their programmes.

The term 'gender mainstreaming' has been highlighted by some respondents as inappropriate given that in many countries, gender is erroneously considered synonymous with women. Programme planning based on this excludes marginalised boys and men and can, and often does, lead to project failure. If civil society were to organise around a plural notion of gender equality, then resources would be allocated more effectively with a higher probability of sustainable success.

The difference between commitment to gender equality and action is evident in the responses. Civil society has shown commitment but there are a number of factors which present a challenge to actual implementation. When asked about the effectiveness of their national women's machineries, answers were fairly equal across the board. Some felt the national women's machineries were effective, and an equal number felt they were not. In most of the Commonwealth countries that responded, the progress towards gender equality necessitates sound and active civil society-government partnerships, and inevitably there are knock-on effects when national women's machineries are felt to be ineffective in their role. The women's machineries remain largely constrained by financial and human resource factors, technical expertise and access to information, all of which are indicators of political commitment to further gender equality. This sentiment echoed throughout this year's meetings of the Commonwealth women's machineries and the meetings of the CGPMG, when addressing the challenges posed to the full implementation of the GPOA.

Access to technical resources and funding remains a concern for civil society, not only for the viability of their own organisations and networks, but also as a sign of government's

commitment to gender equality. Recognising most governments have taken on board the need to mainstream gender into development policies and to harmonise the GPoA with other related mechanisms and commitments such as the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW and the MDGs, civil society would like to see more done to finance, train and support their National Women's Machineries.

At the Commonwealth level, the enabling environment depends on national governments' commitment to the principles of gender equality translated into budget allocations, rather than simply signing up to another plan of action. Communication and cooperation across borders, and the adoption of international instruments on gender and human rights in national development policies would create a more 'horizontal' engagement of civil society across countries. For example, Bangladeshi civil society has cited its 'invisibility' with regards to policy promotion and implementation. Instead they feel external support generated by regional and global social movements would have the potential to generate change in their country.

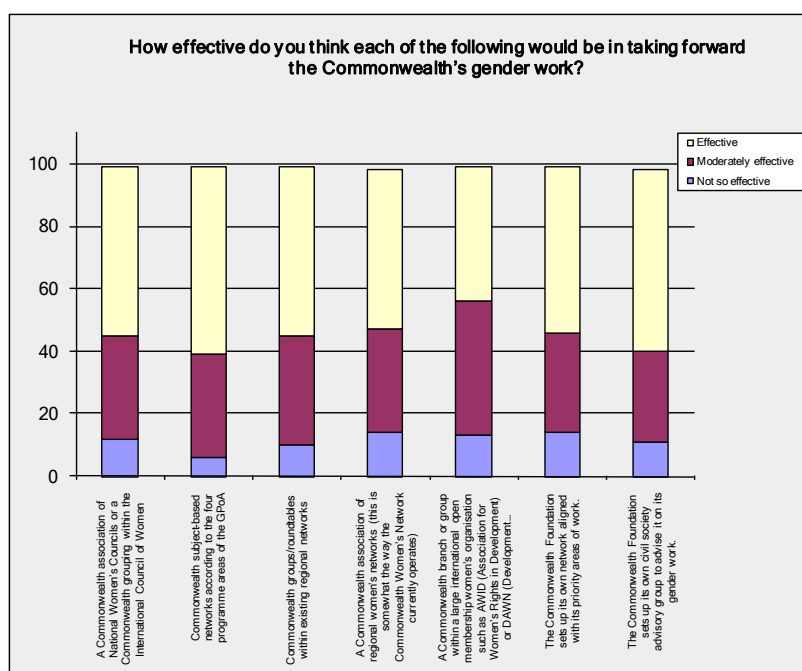
Civil society feels there is, increasingly, support from donors and the private sector to undertake gender work, whereas the Commonwealth itself provides opportunities for engagement, capacity building and knowledge sharing.

Taking Forward Gender Equality in the Commonwealth

Networks and associations of varying forms and characteristics are the best way to take forward civil society's work on gender equality. They provide space to generate synergies amongst stakeholders with diverse interests and expertise and constitute an enabling mechanism for civil society to engage as partners in policy processes, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful implementation.

Grassroots activists and social movements have more opportunities to leverage their strengths if they form networks. However, it is a challenge for networks to ensure that they add value to their members' work, and facilitate equitable representation amongst the constituency to participate at national, regional and Commonwealth-wide platforms.

Results Table 10: Building effectiveness in implementation of the GPoA

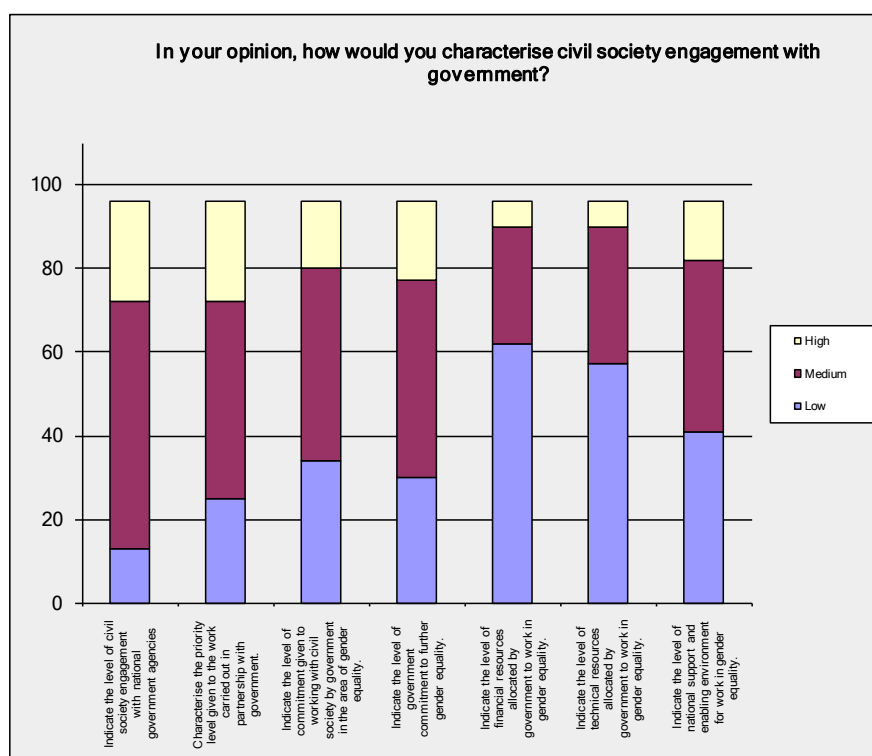


Civil Society Engagement with Government

Joint government and civil society partnerships provide a unique space for dialogue and collaboration, a mechanism which has helped to evolve attitudes and introduce novel ideas and modes of working for all stakeholders. Generally, the understanding of this type of partnership has to occur in the context of political pluralism in the public sphere. The absence of tolerance in the public arena in accommodating diverse agendas leads to social and political exclusion and sets the constraints for limited civic participation in policy processes, public administration and decision-making.

Good governance defines the context in which civic engagement can take place. However these Survey findings also show that the concept of civil society engagement with government is one in which both sides are struggling to find common ground, particularly as the priorities and realities on either side are often different.

Results Table 11: Characteristics of civil society engagement with governments



Interestingly, though Survey responses indicate primarily low and medium-levels of engagement with government across a range of indicators, respondents do work in partnership with a cross section of government agencies and ministries, including the national women’s machineries. Over 65% of respondents characterised the level of financial support allocated to the promotion of gender equality by government as low, and 60% said they perceived there were equally low priorities by governments in allocating technical resources to this area of work. Nearly 49% of respondents characterised their level of engagement with government as medium, whereas 48% felt the same priority given to the work carried out in partnership with civil society. Some respondents cited the length of time taken to establish a working gender policy in their countries, and now they face the additional hurdle of getting to the implementation stage. Others noted that despite a minister being in post, engagement of women’s organisations by the government was lacking. Some acknowledge that lack of engagement has hindered their countries’ progress towards the MDGs.

Inevitably, the political, social and economic environment in a particular country sets the context in which civil society can function. In line with the results of this Survey, some independent analysts suggest that one of the constraints to civil society engagement in policy processes is government scepticism about participatory approaches. But many government agencies and institutions also lack the capacity in terms of information, and continuous and ongoing technical and human resources, to engage in broad based participation with civil society. This can hinder achievement of long-term objectives and delivery of national, regional and global action plans. At the same time, as civic engagement becomes increasingly intertwined with the work of government institutions, the work undertaken by civil society must face rigorous legitimacy, feasibility and accountability benchmarks.

Civil Society in the Commonwealth

Rich in commitment and determination, but poor in financial resources, the work of civil society organisations is inevitably often limited in scope, scale and sustainability. Achieving sustainable gains requires more effective partnerships because challenging political and economic environments constrain not just the work of civil society, but also what governments are able to commit. In the final report of the Mid Term Review of civil society's activities in support of the GPoA case studies from Botswana, Zambia, India, Bangladesh, Belize, Jamaica, Tonga and Samoa will illustrate how partnerships can work, and what barriers exist.

ENDS