

Commonwealth Peoples, Forum
Mediterranean Conference Centre, Valetta

Sunday 20 November

Speech

by

Mrs Florence Mugasha
Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting us to speak at this Forum.

Due to unforeseen developments, the Secretary - General is unable to be with you on this important occasion. He was determined not to miss this event but as I speak he is just about to land in Malta.

For us, the Commonwealth, at its core is about people – as individuals and within communities. And so this Forum and all that it represents is fundamental to the CHOGM later this week, and to the outcomes there.

My thanks to all of you who have come so far to contribute. Your voice will be heard.

My presence here in particular is a chance to acknowledge the great work of civil society organisations.

We can take stock of the many important events and processes that have taken place in 2005:

- the Commission for Africa and the G8 summit on this side of the world with the commitments to reduce debt and increase aid;
- last week's summit on the information society just across the sea in Tunisia;
- the decisions confirmed in Washington at the World Bank and IMF to cancel debt for some of the poorest countries in the developing world;
- and now we await the decisive one we in the Commonwealth this week can hopefully influence – to see a real breakthrough on agriculture in the Doha Development Round.

Civil society has played an important role in all this, bringing governments to these pledging and commitment starting lines.

And it is our hope that those resources pledged and promises made will be honoured in full. As we have been saying all year, it's now a matter of 'delivery, delivery, delivery'. We encourage you to keep on the pressure.

Civil society organisations perform a vital role within the Commonwealth. You are valued because you contribute to the realisation of our shared goals: you add value to people's participation in the democratic process. And where democracies flourish, the conditions exist for economic opportunity and growth.

You also contribute, at national and international levels, to the debate on how to eliminate some of the gravest social challenges and scandals of our time. I use that word "scandal" deliberately. The failure to eliminate poverty by now is just that.

The world today is one of deep contrasts. The gap between the haves and have-nots has not diminished; the disproportionate material wealth in the

developed, world can hardly go unnoticed by those in the developing world who still struggle to put food on the table. The inequalities that exist between men and women, and the economic hardships faced by so many millions, are yet to be adequately redressed.

Poverty continues to be one of the great ills. It is with shame that we still live in a world in which many people live on less than one dollar a day. Almost two thirds of the worlds HIV/AIDS cases and maternal deaths take place in Commonwealth countries. More than half the world's 115 million children without an education, are in the Commonwealth.

The Millennium Development Goals set out a plan to build a safer, fairer and more prosperous world. We learned at the UN summit in September that the glass is more or less half-full in terms of progress towards those goals. That is not satisfactory, especially as a number of those who have fallen behind are Commonwealth members.

But without the contribution of civil society organisations where would we be today? You have been working to ensure that governments and intergovernmental organisations do not miss the vital ingredient to make all ambitious plans work: the participation of people.

Let me dwell on the relationship between governments and civil society for a moment. There is, and has always been, a fine balance between the two. Indeed, some even ask if the two can easily co-exist.

The tensions that arise as informal groups come together to push and stretch the boundaries of government policies are legitimate experiences. But so too are claims by many elected officials, that it is their government policies that truly reflect the will of the people. After all, it is 'the people' who elected them in the first place.

In some respects, the tension arises because civil society organisations can often focus on a specific issue, whereas a political party in a democracy, for instance, needs to embrace and reconcile views on a number of such issues, and often have to trade off between issues.

Each time one adds an extra bit of policy weight to a political party, its ability to respond with speed and agility on any single issue is diminished. But that is not to say, that it is not concerned about that single specific issue.

If the two perspectives – that of civil society and that of governments - were staked out in the ground, one would expect to see them poles apart. But it is the Commonwealth view that they are closer than you would think, and can be brought closer.

If you believe your policy is right, if you have tested it intellectually and relentlessly, you will win in the end. You just have to keep pushing. Lean against something long enough and it will give.

Bear in mind that this year marks the 40th anniversary of the establishment of both the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation. It is no small matter that Heads of Government recognised back then that it was important to create space for civil society to participate as an equal and a partner.

It underscores that ours is an organisation that works hard to be inclusive and that this comes from political leaders – it was and remains their wish rather than being forced upon them.

In 1999, in Durban, government leaders welcomed the spread of ideas, information and knowledge in building civil support for social equality, and in opposing all forms of discrimination and other injustices based on ethnicity, gender, race and religion. This commitment paved the way for an even more open relationship with civil society organisations.

This relationship was taken another step forward with this year's country-level discussions with civil society and governments officials, led by the Commonwealth Foundation. Those discussions covered the Millennium Development Goals, Africa, Small States and the Digital Divide. It was a great opportunity for open up discussion on those very important topics. And it was a positive experience all around. We thank you once again for your support to that exercise.

This year's CHOGM theme is 'Networking the Commonwealth for Development', and we are sure you will make the most of your own networks to enhance the lives of the millions of people that we serve.

Our Maltese hosts are rightly drawing attention to the value and importance of using information technology to meet development challenges. As I've also been saying, the beauty and value of our Commonwealth networks is that they operate in a whole range of ways. They can harness and promote ICTs for development, and they can also keep stretching on beyond the last telegraph pole.

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I wish every success to the People's Forum and the People's Centre and wish to assure you that he will visit you at an early opportunity during this Forum.

Thank You.