

A forum for the people

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VIJAY KRISHNARAYAN is the Director of the Commonwealth Foundation. He has supported civil society organisations in the United Kingdom, Caribbean and the wider Commonwealth over the last 25 years. As Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, he led the coordination of civil society inputs to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings in 2007 (Kampala), 2009 (Port of Spain), 2011 (Perth) and 2013 (Sri Lanka).

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is held every two years in the run-up to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. It is a joint enterprise, with civil society in the host country and around the globe coming together with the Commonwealth Foundation to design the programme.

The Foundation is unique in that it is funded by and reports to Commonwealth governments, but has a mandate to work with civil society organisations. When we talk about civil society, we include in our constituency civil society organisations across the Commonwealth at a national, regional and international level that see themselves in our work – and that includes those that are explicitly accredited to the Commonwealth.

Our mission is focused on people's engagement in governance – the rules, institutions and processes through which policy is made. We advance this through programmes and grants which aim to build the capacity of civil society to engage with policy makers, improve the quality of that engagement, encourage the use of creative expression to enable people to have their say, and share the learning generated by all that we do.

The mission resonates strongly with current thinking on development and progress. The Sustainable Development Goals, which were agreed by the international community this year, make several references to people's participation. SDG Goal 16 is particularly relevant, with its emphasis on peaceful and inclusive societies, and effective and accountable institutions at all levels.

The Foundation is committed to the CPF because it provides a platform for civil society to learn and share knowledge with other civil society organisations from

every region of the Commonwealth; it also enables constructive engagement between civil society and policy makers on key issues like education in small states.

There will be around 400 delegates participating in 19 sessions at the Forum, and these will include case studies, policy dialogues and sharing sessions all related to the theme: *'What makes societies resilient'*.

We have focused on resilience because threats and shocks such as increasing frequent and intense storms, food price volatility, global financial crises, conflicts and epidemic diseases are perceived as more prevalent and destructive as they've ever been. Climate change, globalisation, inter- and intra-national migration and the growing interconnectedness of people add to the complexity. It is also clear that governments cannot address these issues on their own. This in turn means that new policies, processes and structures are needed that enable people to come together – there is a pressing need for resilience-focused governance.

The single common thread in all sessions is the need for resilience as a tool for societal development; and the opportunities and challenges associated with making the concept of resilience meaningful for people.

The People's Forum will generate specific proposals that civil society will discuss with Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministers. It will also outline initiatives that could be taken forward over the next two years, for example through the proposed Small States Centre of Excellence, which is expected to be launched at CHOGM 2015.

It is important to acknowledge the support of the host government in delivering a successful CPF. The Government of Malta has been a willing and supportive partner. In 2005, when Malta last hosted the Heads of Government and the CPF, the government supported the first ever dialogue between civil society organisations and Commonwealth Foreign Ministers. That has now become an established part of the programme. This year we have seen support for the first ever dialogue between civil society and the candidates vying to become the next Commonwealth Secretary General, which will feature in this year's CPF programme. We envisage this becoming a regular fixture. It is this kind of engagement that reminds us both of the ways in which Commonwealth processes change and evolve, and the ways in which these can be opened up to civil society so that we can truly 'Add Global Value'.



Vijay Krishnarayan at the CPF during CHOGM 2013