

The Aberdeen Agenda:

COMMONWEALTH PRINCIPLES
ON **GOOD PRACTICE FOR LOCAL
DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE**



Endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government at
their meeting in Malta in 2005 and reaffirmed at their
meeting in Kampala in 2007



Introduction

Commonwealth member states share common values of democracy and standards. The shared values, structures and experiences within the Commonwealth family provide a framework for working together in partnership and undertaking joint activities.

As the designated Commonwealth organisation for local government, CLGF has been promoting local democracy and helping governments and local governments to assess the health of local democracy in their own countries. It has worked with members and key stakeholders to look at what factors, or principles, are important for local democracy and good governance.

The 2005 Commonwealth Local Government Conference was held in Aberdeen Scotland in March 2005. The theme of the conference was *deepening local democracy*. It brought together more than 500 senior local government stakeholders from more than 40 countries to consider what makes effective local governance.

The discussions at the conference led to the *Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth Principles on Good Practice for Local Democracy and Good Governance* which was formally approved by CLGF members. The *Aberdeen Agenda* presents a set of standards for healthy local democracy and good governance.

All too often commitments or declarations made at international conferences are forgotten or not followed up. This has not been the case with the *Aberdeen Agenda*. The principles were formally incorporated as part of the Commonwealth's fundamental political values at the 2005 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and reaffirmed at the 2007 CHOGM. They are intended to guide Commonwealth states on core

principles for promoting local democracy and governance to ensure that local development is participatory and citizen-focused, benefits local people, and that citizens have a major say in their governance and development.

Many countries are implementing these principles and assessing how they measure up to them. An in-depth assessment was done in Uganda, with the help of CLGF, to develop a methodology for assessing the state of local democracy in member countries. This methodology is being rolled out to other member countries.

CLGF is also working with its members on specific principles, and has held specialised events on gender, inclusivity and funding.

We hope that other countries will undertake reviews on how the principles are being followed, identifying strengths and weaknesses in their local government structures and systems to determine how improvements can be made. CLGF will assist it's members as far as possible in this process to continually improve methodologies and strengthen local democracy and good governance.



Carl Wright
Secretary-General, CLGF

Commonwealth principles on good practice for local democracy and good governance

1. **Constitutional and legal recognition for local democracy: local democracy should enjoy constitutional and legal recognition.**

Local government should be recognised as a sphere of government. Legal and constitutional recognition are important to protect the fundamental principle of local democracy. Respect for this protection ensures institutional security for local democracy.

2. **The ability to elect local representatives: citizens should be able to elect their local representatives in conditions of political freedom.**

It is important for local representatives to reflect the views and needs of the community they serve. We believe that this is best achieved through regular/timely local elections which are both open and inclusive. Whatever the means or processes of local democracy, the results should reflect the wishes of the electorate.

3. **Partnerships between spheres of government: there should be cooperation and partnership among local, regional/provincial and national spheres of government.**

Effective democracy demands respect between the different spheres of government and recognises the defined roles they play in serving their citizens.

It is important to ensure that there is regular dialogue and cooperation between the different spheres. Strong intergovernmental relations will promote greater alignment of national, regional and local priorities. Significant decentralisation requires cooperation and strengthened coordination between the different spheres of government.

4. **Defined legislative framework: local democracy should ensure local government has appropriate powers in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.**

Democratic local government, with clearly defined powers, serves as the means by which the community can shape their livelihoods.

Effective devolution enables the views of the local community to be expressed and their views taken into account in decisions implemented to improve the quality of life of all citizens locally.

5. **Opportunity to participate in local decision-making: all citizens should be able to participate actively in the local democratic process.**

Local democracy gives citizens the freedom to participate in making decisions that are locally appropriate and serve the needs of local community. Effective consultation is central to the engagement of the community in the local policy making process.

However, critical to this is a vibrant civil society and a clearly defined relationship between it and local government. It is important for local government to be proactive, and reach out to its communities to ensure that public participation is maximised. The political will to develop that relationship with its electorate must be nurtured within the local council itself.

The building of a robust relationship between local government and civil society is central to local democracy and to the development of sustainable communities.

6. **Open local government – accountability: local government should be accountable to the community it serves.**

Local government should be accountable to the community it serves while operating within the legal and policy framework of other spheres of government.

Robust, independent regulatory bodies need to be in place to safeguard against corruption, mismanagement and the inappropriate use of resources by local government, politicians, and officials.

Civil society needs to be strengthened as a counterpart in this process. Participatory budgeting is a tool for enhancing accountability which is also effective at training local civil society in holding their local councils to account.

7. **Open local government – transparency: the local decision making process should be open and transparent.**

The way local government makes decisions should be clear and clearly communicated to the community it serves. Local councils need to adopt a public information strategy using different media and reaching all of society.

8. **Openness to scrutiny: The work of the executive should be subject to scrutiny.**

Policy determined by the executive/local authority should be open to scrutiny by other elected members and appropriate civil society organisations/ community individuals. Effective leadership should welcome scrutiny both from within the local council and by the wider community.

This requires skilled councillors and individuals in civil society able to effectively scrutinise policy and processes intelligently and constructively.

9. **Inclusiveness: the process of local decision-making must reflect the social, economic, environmental and cultural needs of the entire community.**

Decisions should be taken at the level closest to the community to which they relate. Consultation is essential to ensure the needs of the whole community are met, especially with disadvantaged groups including women, youth, minority groups and people with disabilities, whose voices are often neglected.

The Commonwealth and the CLGF are committed to a target of no less than 30 per cent of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors, and to developing strategies for increasing their active participation.

Commitment to downward accountability is critical to citizen engagement. Participatory planning is a tool to ensure inclusive and equitable planning.

10. **Adequate and equitable resource allocation: in order to respond to the needs of the local community.**

Local government must have adequate financial resources to fulfil its mandate and ensure significant autonomy in resource allocation.

An independent and secure revenue base is key to sound management of resources, and included in this is the predictability and adequacy of financial transfers from central to local government in terms of timeliness and amounts. Such transfers must be free of political bias, and a local government agreement or legal framework to govern such transfers is often of critical importance.

In the distribution of resources, local government must be seen as an integral part of the overall public sector involved in delivering key public services.

11. **Equitable service delivery: the distribution of services should reflect the diverse needs of the local community.**

Services provided by local government should be accessible to all. The poor and marginalised, may in certain circumstances, require local government to adopt proactive policies to address their particular needs.

There is a balance to be struck between nationally set standards and locally set priorities. Local government should have the space to respond to the needs of its local area.

12. **Building strong local democracy and good governance: commitment to continuous capacity development of democratic local government**

Effective leadership is central to strong local democracy. It is important to strengthen and build the capacity of councillors, officers, and local governance institutions to ensure that local democracy can enable local government to deliver quality services to the local community. Community leadership is an important and growing role for local government in the creation of sustainable communities.

There is also a need to promote civic education and build the capacity of civil society organisations to enable them to engage in and participate effectively in the local democratic process.

Measuring a council's process and performance in terms of local democracy and governance based on empirical evidence, is key to informing its developmental strategies.

There is a role for councils and communities to develop international partnerships. There is a role for international local government organisations, including CLGF, in assisting its members in building stronger local democracy. CLGF should assist in building capacity through a number of means including the exchange of good practice, the dissemination of information and specific technical assistance projects.

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) works to promote and strengthen effective democratic local government throughout the Commonwealth and to encourage the exchange of good practice in local government structures and services



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