



## **54<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference**

# **Summary Statement**

**Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
1 – 10 August 2008**

An extensive programme of policy and legislation priorities for governments and international agencies was proposed by Parliamentarians attending the 2008 Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference and related meetings in Kuala Lumpur in August.

The 54<sup>th</sup> annual Conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), hosted by the Parliament of Malaysia, put forward the policies as over 600 Members and officials of approximately 170 Parliaments and Legislatures of Commonwealth nations, states, provinces and territories considered solutions to key global issues.

The meeting, chaired by Hon. Tan Sri Datuk Pandikar Amin Haji Mulia, MP, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Malaysia, included the CPA Small Branches Conference and the meeting of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians. Summary Statements from all three conferences appear below.

## **54<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference**

### **Workshop A: Democracy and Global Peace**

Parliament will be able to contribute to the peaceful resolution of conflicts if it retains the trust of the people in its ability to be an effective forum for open and inclusive dialogue, argued participants in the conference's first workshop.

Calling on Parliament and political parties to bring the views of all sectors of society, including minorities, into the political debate both through representation in Parliament and through the involvement of civil society, non-governmental organizations and the media in the parliamentary process, Members said Parliament will build public confidence in it as a forum for resolving disputes.

Trust, dialogue, opportunity and legitimacy were considered as prerequisites for parliamentary involvement. Others emphasized the need for the CPA to look into assisting in the fight to preserve the environment. The respect for minority views and the participation of various stakeholders in achieving peace were prominent among the views expressed by speakers.

Parliament must promote respect for human rights and especially encourage freedom of expression. It must be seen as playing an important part in developing policies on issues such as climate change and sustainable development so people have faith in representative democracy.

## **Workshop B: Rapid Urbanization and Rural Decline**

It is absolutely necessary for nations to pursue the United Nations HABITAT Action Plan to sustain development of the world's cities, towns and villages. This should not be left to individual governments alone, but rather it should be a partnership among all nations and societies. It must move beyond arguments about urban versus rural life to recognize the reality of urban growth and migration and focus on effective management of the process.

All speakers agreed that sustainable development and sustainable urbanization should meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Importantly, all Members noted the prediction of the United Nations that in 2008 urban population will equal rural population and this will lead progressively to the dominance of urban population.

Sustainable development encompasses a number of inter-related areas and highlights sustainability as an idea of environmental, economic and social progress and equity, all within the limits of the world's natural resources. This also addresses the global issues of poverty, inequality, hunger and environmental degradation.

The principal challenges to sustainable urbanization lie in the general lack of planning, implementation and management capabilities on the part of local government and their local partners. Urban governance and management should take into account fiscal and political decentralization, spatial planning, management and climate change, along with pro-poor equal access to land and housing and the provision of basic infrastructure and services.

There should be a coherent overall framework involving governments, local authorities, private sectors, non-governmental organizations and professional groups.

## **Workshop C: Credible Elections**

The desire for all CPA Members to move towards ever more credible elections was emphasized by all the speakers. The need for fully independent electoral commissions and their essential role in the democratic process was stressed by a large number of speakers, especially those from India where they said a well established and successful commission already exists.

The points that emerged most clearly from the workshop were that the will of the people was the basis of the authority to govern and all voters should be treated equally.

## **Workshop D: Reforming the Budget Process**

Parliamentarians agreed that their roles in setting the budget and its implementation have expanded. They stressed that Parliaments need an independent source of information to improve their participation in budget preparation.

They noted that several nations have established Parliamentary Budget Offices to help them counter the information deficit between the executive and the Parliament. Some of the delegates said that the offices were created in their respective nations through legislation.

After sharing experiences, they expressed agreement on the effectiveness of the office. They agreed that it will provide transparency and accountability and enhance credibility and will also improve the budget process. They recommended that the office should be non-partisan, independent, objective and analytic. They further expressed the view that the core functions of

the office should be provided in legislation. With the sharing of experiences, other nations could also create such offices to assist their budget processes.

### **Workshop E: Collaboration among Large and Small States on Climate Change**

Parliamentarians expressed the shared view that as climate change is a global concern, solutions to combat its impact can only be achieved through international co-operation among all states, large and small, initially working through a special Task Force.

MPs shared the view that enough has been said on its detrimental effects, especially on small island states, little has been done about climate change. To this end, it is widely agreed that immediate actions be taken and the MPs at this session proposed the establishment of a Task Force to formulate actions to combat the impacts of climate change.

A few reservations on the establishment of such a Task force – such as its cost implications and mandate to deal with governmental policy issues – were highlighted; but at the conclusion of the discussion, the establishment of the Task Force was unanimously supported. The workshop endorsed a proposal that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Executive Committee consider the establishment of a different Task Force, one on the role of legislators to combat climate change.

### **Workshop F: Parliament and Civil Society Engagement**

Parliamentarians expressed the shared view that the urgent engagement of Parliament with civil society must be encouraged by all nations. Democratic governance can be achieved and promoted if Parliamentarians engage all interest groups in the legislative process in order to identify the best policies to benefit both rural and urban people.

Members expressed diverse views on how this relationship can produce better policy-making mechanisms. They passionately expressed the need for Parliament to engage civil society in the planning of better policies as civil society provides ground support in the implementation of government policies such as the alleviation of poverty, improvement of public infrastructures and the observance of fundamental human rights related to the rule of law, freedom of movement, speech and association.

There was a common acknowledgement that the need for better relations between Parliamentarians and civil society is inevitable as both have the same interests.

Workshop participants unanimously agreed that there can be no meaningful democracy without the positive engagement of civil society. Where this relationship does not exist, member countries must provide an enabling environment through legislation on the involvement of civil society and its attendant rights and freedoms.

### **Workshop G: Parliament in Conflict Prevention and Resolution**

Discussion leaders acknowledged the multi-faceted range of challenges that lie ahead for Parliamentarians in demonstrating leadership to remove and resolve conflict. Sources of conflict – history, inequality, economics, human rights abuses, and election manipulation – must be tackled not just in policy and legislation but in the very behaviour and action that go with the responsibility of being an MP.

A number of key messages emerged during the debate: development and the resolution of issues are difficult whilst violent conflict continues; elected representatives must be allowed to vent the emotions of their communities openly or risk losing peoples' faith; policy and legislation should be used effectively as a vehicle to head off potential conflict situations; Parliamentarians should use innovative approaches to problem-solving, and external influences and involvement can play a very useful if not essential role in avoiding or resolving conflict.

Workshop attendees called on the CPA to play its part, within both member and non-member countries, to promote harmonious government.

## **Workshop H: Recognizing Women's Issues in Budgets**

As the budget is the government's most important policy instrument, this comprehensive statement of the nation's priorities must pay special attention to societal issues which particularly affect women. These include education, employment, housing, availability of financing, facilities for the care of children and the elderly and the plight of rural women. Participants unanimously recognized that these problems have a greater impact on women and children, making them among the most vulnerable in society.

In identifying strategies to ensure that account is taken of women's issues in budgetary processes, foremost among the recommendations was the need for the CPA to be the forerunner in gender budgeting by, first, ensuring adequate funding for women's programmes with the organization's budget and, secondly, assisting member Parliaments and Legislatures to develop gender-sensitive budgets.

The following matters should also be considered:

- Sensitizing persons involved in the budget process, as well as women themselves who are affected by these budgets;
- Will and commitment of decision-makers;
- Transparency in the budget preparation process, and
- Evaluating and monitoring budget processes.

## **Plenary: The Global Food Crisis**

Commonwealth governments must lead a new global partnership against soaring food prices through co-ordinated policies to increase food production, curb the cultivation of biofuel crops instead of food, curtail corporate profiteering in the food industry and improve soil, water and land use management, said delegates speaking on the current worldwide food pricing crisis.

Although speakers attributed the crisis to many possible causes, there was agreement that a co-ordinated international programme on food production, distribution and pricing should replace the piecemeal and sometimes contradictory policies they accused intergovernmental agencies of pursuing. The Commonwealth can lead the way in promoting co-operative policies and legislation, including pooling knowledge about technological developments and scientific research to clarify the sources of the food crisis and its most effective solutions.

High priority should be given to encouraging people, especially the young and small land-holders, to stay in agriculture and this must be complemented by incentives and infrastructure projects to improve production and access to markets. Urgent action is required so past progress in reducing poverty and hunger and the future achievement of the Millennium Development Goals are not undermined.

## **Plenary: The Communications Challenge for Parliament**

Improving parliamentary governance depends on the prompt provision of better information on policy issues to Parliamentarians and to the people, so governments must not use financial constraints to justify restricting Parliament's ability to communicate with the people. Hampering Parliament's ability to inform the people about issues and Parliament's contribution to their resolution will undermine public support for parliamentary democracy, argued delegates at the final plenary session.

Parliaments in turn must make full use of broadcasting, websites, email, e-petitions and the electronic publication of all documents so citizens are fully informed about issues and can have direct access both to their elected representatives and to debates. Parliaments should provide people with information unedited by the media as well opening both Chamber and committee meetings to full media coverage, including, where possible, live broadcasting.

Public access to the parliamentary process should be increased through more face-to-face interactions between people and their elected representatives, including by holding periodic House sittings and committee hearings away from the capital and facilitating school visits to Parliament.

There was some support for ensuring that parliamentary Standing Orders allow Parliamentarians to access the internet in the Chamber.

## **28<sup>th</sup> Small Branches Conference**

### **1<sup>st</sup> Plenary: Water and Waste Management in Sustainable Development**

Delegates agreed that small states need to take appropriate measures, through planning and the enactment of appropriate legislation and regulations, to manage and protect their water resources and to deal with waste. The need to protect water resources, which were already sparse in some small states, was particularly important in the light of on-going concerns about climate change.

Delegates also discussed the associated topic of waste management and noted that steps are now being taken in a number of jurisdictions represented at the conference to reduce and re-use waste and to recycle as much as possible of the residual waste. Education plays a significant part in waste reduction as Members stressed the value of raising awareness of the issue to ensure that everyone in the community knows the steps that can be taken to ensure that there is the minimum environmental damage caused.

### **2nd Plenary: Conflicts of Interest and Corruption**

Measures to improve government transparency and accountability and strengthen parliamentary oversight and audits of the executive were advocated as the most effective ways to curtail corruption and reduce the debilitating effects of wrong-doing on development and on the provision of public services in small states.

In the parliamentary field, the establishment of codes of conduct for Ministers and for Members as well as requirements for them to declare their assets were seen as deterrents to misconduct by Parliamentarians and as symbols to convince the people that they should not tolerate instances in which MPs or civil servants use public positions for personal gain.

While none of these measures alone was seen as completely effective in stopping corruption or conflicts of interest, participants recognized their cumulative effect in promoting honesty in public service. Freedom of information legislation and the promotion of freedom of the press were also seen as essential in exposing improprieties and raising public expectations of good governance in the best interests of all, especially the most vulnerable as they rely most heavily on government services which are undermined by corruption.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary:      The Challenges of Democratic Elections**

Although all electoral systems are different and each state must adopt the system most suited to its jurisdiction, it was agreed that the fundamental questions of how to get people involved, the age they should become involved and steps to ensure that people who want to vote can do so need to remain in the forefront of the minds of those responsible for a state's political development.

To ensure that the electoral system keeps up with changing times and methods, methods which would allow people wishing to participate in the electoral process to do so as effortlessly as possible merit close consideration, agreed delegates.

Among the electoral issues which should be considered are compulsory voting, election financing, electronic voting, candidate eligibility rules and the reduction of the voting age to 16 and other ways of involving young people in politics.

### **Plenary 4:      Small States in International Institutions**

Small states must maintain a constant direct dialogue with intergovernmental agencies and with large nations critical to their development in order to protect themselves and their economies from destabilization by international decision-making, said speakers in this debate on how small states should protect their interests in the global community.

While acknowledging that Commonwealth multilateral assistance is valuable in helping small states deal with such intergovernmental agencies as the World Trade Organization, Members urged small states to maintain individual bilateral relations with intergovernmental agencies rather than leaving it to large nations to protect their interests. Dependent territories must also keep pressure on their metropolitan powers to respect and fully represent their interests, as should small independent states which have close links with larger countries. But Members agreed that these contacts should supplement, not replace, direct relations as several jurisdictions, including dependencies, reported significant successes in protecting their rights through bilateral dialogue.

Small states were also urged to use Commonwealth assistance to strengthen their international positions as it works effectively in such areas as the protection of skilled workforces, climate change and the protection of small states' brands.

# **Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Meeting**

## **Plenary:           Eliminating Violence against Women, Especially Domestic Violence**

Parliamentarians must ensure legislation is in place to guarantee equality and remove discrimination. It was agreed by women Parliamentarians speaking at their conference that legislation should also be introduced to address issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace and honour killings, and that laws could be usefully shared among Commonwealth Parliaments. Parliamentary committees can be used to ensure violence against women and children remains on the political agenda.

Members of Parliament, both male and female, should be made aware of the impact of domestic violence on family and community life. The education of boys and girls in schools should be an integral part of the process to combat and prevent domestic violence. There was also agreement that it is vital to provide training for police personnel dealing with domestic violence cases and to provide shelters and resources for women and families wishing to leave their abusers. Participants welcomed the introduction in some jurisdictions of national resource centres for victims of domestic violence.

Members also advocated non-legislative measures, such as raising awareness about “non-violent communication” and building partnerships between government and the private sector in providing solutions such as programmes for batterers. It was also noted that the trafficking of women and children is increasing and that Parliamentarians have an important role and responsibility to introduce anti-trafficking measures.