

Advancing human rights



Human rights have long been at the centre of the Commonwealth's values and its practical interventions, and the Commonwealth Secretariat's work in the field has achieved growing prominence in recent years. The importance attached to human rights specifically is reflected in the enhanced autonomy of the Human Rights Unit since its reconstitution in January 2002.

“Respect for fundamental human rights is a core Commonwealth principle, enshrined in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration. Taking human rights seriously means recognising the equal worth of all human beings and respecting every person’s fundamental political and civil rights. Human rights are also about social and economic development. It is important to recognise that while millions of people do not have access to clean water, sufficient food, education and proper health care, they will not have the opportunity to realise their potential and rise above the mire of poverty.”

Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon

The new mandate of the Human Rights Unit is to:

- develop programmes to support Commonwealth commitment to the promotion and protection of fundamental human rights; more specifically, to develop programmes that emphasise the indivisibility of civil, political, economic and social rights;
- publish human rights materials for member countries;
- collaborate and co-operate with Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth governmental and non-governmental organisations working in the field of human rights, interacting especially with the United Nations system;
- provide the Secretary-General with advice on CMAG issues as required; and
- integrate human rights standards within all Divisions of the Secretariat.

Strategic framework

With the strategic goal of strengthening democracy and respect for human rights within the Commonwealth, the Secretariat has focused on determining ‘best practice’ and standard setting; strengthening national and regional human rights mechanisms; increasing awareness of and respect for human rights throughout the

Commonwealth, especially among young people; and mainstreaming human rights across the Secretariat's programmes.

Best practice on human rights issues

A number of Expert Groups were convened to establish best practice in accordance with Commonwealth values and international human rights standards. Reports and guidelines produced by the Expert Groups have been published and disseminated widely.

Trafficking in persons, especially women and children, for commercial sexual exploitation is one of the fastest growing areas of international criminal activity and of increasing concern to the international community. Trafficking for the purposes of labour exploitation, forced labour, marriage, adoption and trade in organs are also areas of concern. The overwhelming majority of trafficked persons are women and girls. Consequently, one Expert Group focused on strategies to combat unlawful trafficking of women and children.

Another Expert Group examined the fundamental human rights of freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly and association, as set out in international and regional human rights instruments. The Expert Group considered factors which hinder the enjoyment of these rights by citizens, and

Above:

Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General Florence Mugasha (right) meets with delegates from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Opposite (top):

A Commonwealth workshop on youth, law and human rights in Asia

Opposite (bottom):

A workshop in South Africa on best practices for Southern and Eastern African human rights commissions

Asia Region Workshop on Youth, Law 23rd -25th April 2003 Mumbai, India.

recommended 'best practice' guidelines to overcome these hindrances.

Victims of crime are sometimes overlooked when consideration is given to reforming criminal justice systems. This can lead to the incorrect perception that 'criminals have more rights than victims' and can erode confidence in the judiciary and justice systems. The Expert Group examining these issues developed 'best practice' guidelines for dealing with victims at various stages in the criminal justice system, including the role of police, prosecutors and courts. It also looked at issues of compensation and restitution for victims of crime.

Strengthening national human rights institutions

Training has been provided to enable national human rights institutions to carry out their mandates. A workshop for National Human Rights Institutions of Southern and Eastern African Commonwealth countries was held in collaboration with the Human Rights Centre of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. National human rights institutions from Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Seychelles, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia participated.

Similar workshops are planned for other regions of the Commonwealth. The aim is to link up national human rights institutions with tertiary education institutions, as well as to promote networking between human rights institutions, to enable them to render a more professional service in carrying out their mandates.

Introduction to law and human rights for young people

The Secretariat is also focusing on training youth in the field of human rights. A training workshop for tutors of the Commonwealth Youth Programme's (CYP) Youth in Development Diploma programme was held in collaboration with the CYP's Asia Centre in Mumbai, India. Representatives from ten tertiary institutions in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka were trained in teaching human rights. Further



training workshops in other regions of the Commonwealth are planned.

Publications

The Secretariat has distributed publications to provide information on human rights issues to member countries. These include:

Introduction to Law and Human Rights for Young People; Commonwealth Guidelines for the Treatment of Victims of Crime; and Tackling the Unconstitutional Overthrow of Democracies: Emerging Trends in the Commonwealth. Human rights activities and publications are posted on the Secretariat's website, including a regularly updated table showing the status of ratifications of the principal international human rights treaties in the Commonwealth. A growing network of partners in the human rights field receive the Secretariat's *Human Rights Update* newsletter.

Collaboration with other organisations

The profile of human rights in the Commonwealth has been raised further through interaction with international and

regional human rights bodies such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The Secretariat has a Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Regular meetings are held with various officials from the Office of the High Commissioner, and there is a regular exchange of information.

There are also regular meetings with international non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Association for the Prevention of Torture.

Mainstreaming human rights

The Secretariat has been mainstreaming Commonwealth values and international human rights standards through all its Divisions. In accordance with the Harare Declaration's commitment to "extending the benefits of development within a framework of respect for human rights", the Human Rights Unit has been examining the application of a rights-based approach to the Secretariat's own development programmes.

