



A Declaration by the Commonwealth Heads of Government concerning the role of civil society in reducing poverty in the countries of the Commonwealth

BRISBANE, OCTOBER 2001

The Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) has drafted the following declaration designed to illustrate what we would have included in any final set of documents adopted by the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Brisbane if we had the power to do so!

Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Brisbane in October 2001 considered the role of civil society organisations in reducing poverty in Commonwealth countries. We came to the conclusion that 2001 would be an appropriate occasion to reaffirm the beliefs, values, traditions and, in some countries, statutes which go back for 400 years or more.

We concluded that a new Declaration, designed to encourage civil society organisations within the framework of the laws of each country, would bring new energy and purpose to partnerships between civil society and governments.

What follows is a Preamble explaining the historical origins and connections between problems faced in the seventeenth century, issues needing to be tackled today and the proposed Declaration.

Preamble: 1601 to 2001

In October 1601 Queen Elizabeth I signed what has become known as the Statute of Charitable Uses. The Preamble to the 1601 Act had the effect of defining charitable law and the responsibilities of both the state and private philanthropy with particular regard to poverty.

Heads of Government recognise that the range of social, economic and environmental problems faced by Commonwealth countries today can best be addressed by a partnership between governments, private business and the non-profit sector.

When defining what is charitable the laws of a number of Commonwealth countries refer back to the tenets set out in the 1601 Act. Poverty remains a curse which afflicts many of our people and the relief of poverty is still the cornerstone of charity law. In 2001 the prevalence of poverty, sometimes abject poverty, is one of the major problems faced by many of our governments.

Now, as then, poverty stems from three roots: first from nature in the form of storms, pestilence,

Published by
Charities Aid Foundation (CAF)
Kings Hill, West Malling
Kent, ME19 4TA, UK
Tel +44 (0)1732 520 000
Fax +44 (0)1732 520 001
Website www.CAFonline.org

drought and earthquake; second from the results of war and oppression; and third from the lack of economic opportunity aggravated by lawlessness and the scourge of drug addiction, reinforcing this circle of deprivation.

Heads of Government acknowledge that what makes it worse today is our knowledge that abject poverty at least can be eliminated. Many of our governments are striving to eradicate abject poverty by 2015 – a task made even more important by the fact that many of those in poverty are well aware that many others have never been so rich.

Governments have the responsibility to provide a framework of law which releases the energies of the people in both the economic and social spheres. However, experience shows that governments alone cannot eliminate poverty, nor can a simple combination of governments and the market. What is needed also is an active, energetic and responsive non-profit sector able and willing to work in partnership with democratic governments to help meet the needs of the people.

Over the last 400 years many shared values as to the purpose of charity have developed. Queen Elizabeth II, as Head of the Commonwealth, reflects a continuing commitment to such values. One factor, perhaps the most important one, which does and will continue to define the Commonwealth is that it is an area in which civil societies are free to flourish – thereby giving real meaning to the concept of *commonwealth*.

The Declaration

Heads of Government:

- recognise the need to renew efforts to eradicate poverty by all means available to us;
- recognise that in the long-term poverty will be eliminated only within societies that have a framework of law which encourages the growth of liberal institutions, social responsibility within the commercial marketplace and the participation of citizens in the development of their societies both individually and in association with others;
- recognise that, whilst fiscal incentives for charitable activity and social enterprise will vary from country to country, the intention to create a favourable fiscal environment for non-governmental and civil society organisations is a common one;

- recognise that many initiatives to reduce poverty and social exclusion have been developed by civil society organisations;
- recognise that, whilst poverty is the main problem faced by the majority of our governments, a range of other concerns and activities are addressed by both our governments and civil society organisations including the development of our economies, trading relationships and social welfare programmes, opportunities for increased education, the promotion of cultural and artistic diversity and the protection of the natural environment.

The High Level Group has been considering the overall agenda for the Commonwealth in the 21st century and this Declaration reflects the views of the Heads of Government that vibrant civil society organisations are significant providers of social and economic services to people in need as well as vital players in the development of democracy internationally.

Therefore, the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth gathered in October 2001 in Brisbane, Australia, declare that we are intent on encouraging the development of civil society within our various countries in ways which are appropriate to our histories and cultures.

We commit our governments to:

- a review the framework of law and regulation to ensure protection of the public interest and encourage the development of civil society partnerships between government and non-profit organisations;
- b consider what further steps might be taken to ensure that the financial and fiscal environment is supportive of such initiatives;
- c encourage the flow of private philanthropy within the Commonwealth in a way that helps to meet the needs identified in the Preamble to this Declaration;
- d ensure that the Commonwealth Secretariat provides a report to the Heads of Government meeting in 2003 outlining the steps taken by Commonwealth governments in relation to this Declaration.

In pursuit of the intentions of this Declaration, we seek therefore, in so far as it is reasonable, to develop common approaches to encourage civil society.