



FREEPORT DECLARATION ON IMPROVING LOCAL GOVERNMENT: THE COMMONWEALTH VISION

**Outcome of the Commonwealth Local Government Conference 2009,
agreed by the CLGF General Meeting of Members on 15 May 2009**

Preamble

Five hundred and fifty (550) representatives from forty-eight (48) countries met in Freeport, Grand Bahama, 11-14 May 2009 on the occasion of the fifth Commonwealth Local Government Conference and General Meeting of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, CLGF, hosted by the Government of the Bahamas. They agreed as follows:

REAFFIRMING the *Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth Principles for Local Democracy and Good Governance*, welcomed by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 2005 and 2007 as part of the Commonwealth's fundamental political principles, reinforced by the Auckland Accord, and the implementation of these instruments by CLGF and its member organisations;

NOTING that the conference has been held for the first time in the Caribbean, which reflects the region's growing commitment to strengthening and reforming local government;

ACKNOWLEDGING that improving local government to better represent communities and enhance service delivery is an essential component of the Commonwealth vision of local government that is an enabling body, that can act as a community leader and is empowered to forge alliances and partnerships with other organisations to maximise resources in the interests of local development for all;

RECOGNISING the challenges of the current global economic situation and the impact on local communities and the operations of local government;

AGREEING the Freeport Declaration will build on and strengthen the outcomes of Aberdeen and Auckland and look towards to achieving the common vision of improving local government across the Commonwealth.

The local government 'improvement agenda'

1 Local government needs to be reshaped and repositioned in systems of government to overcome capacity constraints and be confident to adopt its genuine role as part of government. Building on the *Aberdeen Agenda* and *Auckland Accord*, local government should have as a core objective continuous improvement of the quality of services and governance it provides to the local community.

2 There is no single model for improved local government that will fit all situations: improvement must fit the purpose within different local contexts.



3 A “business unusual” approach which speaks of confidence, opportunity and innovation rather than helplessness is needed; a shift towards a ‘developmental’ model, with clear strategic vision and leadership, that focuses on what needs to be done rather than on systems and structures.

Consolidating the reinforcing of local government at a time of world economic downturn and resource constraints

4 Improving local government is an important strategy in dealing with world economic downturn and resource constraints. By improving local government we mean not only strengthening the competence of councillors, officers and services but also making sure it has a sound financial base and that there is sound monitoring of performance: this, and not downsizing or cutting budgets necessarily, is the way to tackle economic and financial problems. There is also an important role for local government in developing strategies to respond to the impacts of the economic downturn at community level as part of the community economic planning process.

Strategies to Improve local government

■ Improving the financial base of local government

5 Central and state/provincial government drawing as necessary on budgetary support from international donors, should ensure adequate resources and transfers for local government, especially at a time of recession: Local government visibility must be maintained during periods of recession, and as far as possible revenue streams, in particular councils’ own source revenues, should be retained. Local government is well placed to implement initiatives aimed at stimulating national economies.

6. Major local infrastructure for water, sanitation, electrification and public transport cannot be met from traditional sources of local revenue alone. Grants from national or state/provincial governments and other means such as municipal bond issue, public-private partnerships, borrowings and specific levies and taxes need to be deployed by local government within the framework of the community planning process. Appropriate Commonwealth mechanisms focusing on income generating projects should also be explored.

7 The 2008 *Accra Agenda for Action*, agreed between national governments and development partners, for the first time provides a commitment by national governments that local government should be involved in preparing, implementing and monitoring national development policies and to identify areas where there is a need to strengthen the capacity to perform and deliver services at all levels - national, sub-national, sectoral and thematic and design strategies to address them. It also pledges development partners to support efforts to increase the capacity of local government to take an active role in dialogue on development policy and on the role of aid in contributing to countries’ development objectives. These commitments should be actively implemented and applied in all Commonwealth countries. Development aid should be coordinated with national development strategies and harmonised between donors and stakeholders including local government, and resources should be provided in line with designated responsibilities.

8 Any improvement in the financial base of local government will require adequate local revenues, including both taxes and innovative ways to mobilise local assets and community resources. It will also require strengthened financial management and accountability systems, with an ongoing focus on reform to adapt to changing circumstances. This includes robust, independent regulatory bodies, and strengthening of ‘downward accountability’ which will promote transparency and combat corruption.



■ **Improving local service delivery to meet the needs of the whole community**

9 The global recession is putting pressure on local budgets. Councils need to make use of greater efficiencies and improvements to maintain service delivery standards. They should also try to initiate new services which help local businesses and other stakeholders e.g. social support services, promotion of local economic development. It is important that budgets which support innovations (including those derived from international memberships and partnerships) are not compromised.

10 Local government development projects should have capacity building components within them.

11 Reducing poverty - both rural and urban - and localising the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) such as water and sanitation, primary healthcare and HIV/AIDS responses (and other pandemics), will remain an on-going goal to 2015 and beyond. Although most acute in least developed countries, this goal is relevant to local government everywhere.

12 Local economic development strategies, best driven by councils in partnership with the private sector and other stakeholders, offer an effective way of attracting jobs and investment and creating resources to support local development. Local economic development should embrace the informal sector and home based workers.

13 Rapid urbanisation and population growth, with resulting pressure on services and resources, places huge new demands on local government. Although perhaps most obviously displayed in the growing slums of the mega cities of Africa and Asia, urbanisation pressures are as acute elsewhere, especially in many small island states of the Commonwealth. It is important that dealing with the impacts of urbanisation are given greater recognition by donors, and that urban/municipal development plans are prepared to anticipate and regulate physical growth and associated services.

14 Rural and remote areas present special challenge in the provision of effective local services, given the geographical distances involved and the lack of economies of scale. Remoteness and communication are also factors mitigating against effective service delivery. Relevant innovations such as regional cooperation, pooling of resources among neighbouring councils and working in partnership with other stakeholders need to be promoted.

15 Local government is also in the frontline when dealing with disaster preparedness and disaster mitigation and management. These are areas where significant improvements and innovations have taken place at the local level. Greater emphasis should be placed on addressing issues of sustainable development and local government's role in responding to climate change.

16 Opportunities to make best use of available information communication technology (ICT) to improve governance and service delivery should be actively explored, and support provided to local government to best apply ICT.

■ **Improving community engagement with local government**

17 Effective local government is built on strong citizen participation and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, within an environment of local ownership of the issues facing communities. In the past, local government, like other spheres of government, has often been too remote or too bureaucratic and this needs to change by ensuring community empowerment at parish or neighbourhood level. Such democratic decentralisation or localisation might also entail allocation of small grants and other financial decision-making powers to local community groups.



18 It is important to maintain the cultural and traditional values of the community and for local government to encompass a positive working relationship with traditional governance.

19 Different mechanisms and innovations for improving engagement between local government and the community should be promoted. One such proven mechanism of community empowerment is the strategic participatory budgeting process, where the individual citizen has a say in the setting of council financial priorities. Accountability is enhanced which is also reflected through civil society at many levels holding their local authorities to account. This is a tool for enhancing accountability which is also effective in helping local civil society to hold their local councils to account.

20 Improvement must reach out to the poor, including slum dwellers, rural poor and to groups which are disadvantaged or discriminated against including people with disabilities, immigrants and minorities through affirmative policies. A key goal is establishing inclusive cities, where all citizens have full democratic rights and access to essential services. Strategies such as integrated development planning, access to basic services by all citizens and capacity building of planners, together with political commitment to inclusive cities, will facilitate the desired improvements.

21 Special attention needs to be given to the rights of women, in line with the Commonwealth Plan of Action 2005 - 15 and the target of at least 30 per cent women in public life. This means women's participation and representation across local government, including at leadership level, staff and stakeholders. Local government should develop policies and programmes that are gender sensitive, effective and efficient, and benefit the whole community e.g. gender responsive planning and budgeting. Likewise local government policies must address the requirements of the large and growing number of young people in the Commonwealth. Mentoring programmes can be particularly effective in supporting and empowering young people.

22 Many of the local government improvement strategies will be enhanced by close cooperation with civil society and promoting and funding local NGOs. Local government should actively support youth for example through volunteering and youth entrepreneurship.

■ **Improving central local relations**

23 Local democracy means that local government has appropriate powers in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. Central or where they are responsible, state/provincial governments have a responsibility for providing the legal and operating environment for local government to autonomously undertake the tasks for which it has responsibility and to encourage improvements.

24 Effective partnership between local, state/provincial and national government is an essential element of improved local government. The strength of any partnership is the diversity of views and the ability to come to consensus. It is necessary to have mechanisms for resolving disputes and encouraging cooperation, for example joint committees, working groups and regular meetings of the political leaderships. The same considerations apply to ensuring cooperation between elected councillors and parliamentarians, especially if they represent the same constituency. Strong and vibrant local government associations are valuable components in this process

25 Ministries of local government, urban and rural development have a key oversight and support role. Equally, their staff must have the requisite capacity. This is not only necessary to ensure that they have the right skills to address complex issues of governance, including at international and Commonwealth level, but to ensure that they can take a lead within national or state/provincial government on issues concerning decentralisation and public sector reform.



26 Strong legal frameworks, ideally entrenched in constitutions, supported by reliable funding transfers, facilitate effective relations between central, local and state/provincial government.

■ ***Improving regional cooperation***

27 Developing regional partnerships, both within and between countries, to support national initiatives, is a practical mechanism for improving local government. Opportunities for regional exchange of information and good practice, joint advocacy, collaborative service delivery, economic development and broad-based citizen participation should be built upon and encouraged. Such cooperation demonstrates the link between regional policy and local delivery.

■ ***Improving the competence of local councillors and officials***

28 As set out in the *Aberdeen Agenda*, measures to consolidate and strengthen local democracy, including the ability to elect local representatives in conditions of political freedom and through regular and timely local elections which are both open and inclusive. It is essential that elected and appointed officials have the required competences to carry out their duties

29 To make local government effective, it is essential that the respective roles, functions, and responsibilities of mayors, councillors, council officials as well as those from central and state/provincial government are not only understood but respected. Working relationships need to be clearly defined.

30 To carry out their roles effectively, elected and appointed leaders must have the required capacity and competence. This should be continuously enhanced through targeted development in areas such as interpersonal, negotiation and mediation skills. In particular integrity, honesty, transparency and commitment are integral qualities of effective leaders. Special emphasis should be placed on capacity building for women in local government. Particular attention should also be given to the special capacity building needs of small and remote states, as well as shortages in particular technical disciplines such as engineering.

31 Fiscal decentralisation and managing public funds requires specific expertise. Dealing with for example private capital markets or development funds, needs sound knowledge of finances and budgeting and the deployment of staff with the necessary expertise and qualifications. Special emphasis needs to be placed on on-going capacity building in areas of financial management, planning and budgeting.

■ ***Improving the effectiveness of local government associations (LGAs)***

32 Local government associations (LGAs) are an important vehicle for encouraging the improvement agenda, both in direct support of their own members and in partnership with other spheres of government.

33 LGAs are able to develop dedicated services and structures (such as the UK Improvement and Development Agency) to assist their members in improving both governance and service delivery. They can also assist their members in making use of innovative approaches in the deployment of ICT to encourage greater efficiency and improvement.

34 To fulfill their role effectively, LGAs require formal legal or constitutional recognition and status (as is the case in South Africa) and have the necessary resources for their staffing and



services, including to engage in interaction with their counterparts abroad and take up membership of international organisations like CLGF.

35 As with individual councils, both the political leadership and staff of LGAs require capacity-building. In many, especially developing countries, their staffing levels and resources are extremely minimal and require significant strengthening, notably with help from international partners and donors.

■ ***Improving monitoring and evaluation of the local government sector***

36 Modern local government in the 21st century requires effective and comprehensive systems of monitoring and evaluation of performance improvement to allow councils to assess how well they are meeting their targets and goals, including financial, and to demonstrate their achievements. Effective monitoring processes also permit early detection of problems so remedial actions can be taken. Measuring performance is essential for assessment of quality service delivery. Incremental, locally owned and implemented performance indicators and peer reviews are useful tools in measuring impact.

37 Many countries have developed valuable innovations for monitoring performance. These include such mechanisms as awards that recognise excellence in local government and undertaking peer reviews where fellow councillors and staff from another council assess performance. A number of international mechanisms such as Urban Governance Index (UGI) also exist to assist measurement and comparison. It is important that these innovations are widely disseminated and support is provided to councils to allow them to adopt appropriate systems of measurement.

38 LGAs and ministries of local government have a vital role in encouraging improvement based on performance assessment. It is important that any national systems of assessment are jointly agreed and managed on the basis of transparent consultation between LGAs and ministries. In this way performance monitoring can enhance central local relations.

■ ***The role of CLGF in supporting a culture of improvement in the Commonwealth***

39 CLGF will ensure that the key objectives of the Freeport Declaration are incorporated into its business plan as part of a 'decade of continuous improvement'.

40. CLGF will seek to further strengthen its support for training and capacity building for councillors, building on the *Aberdeen Agenda* and the *Auckland Accord* and to disseminate and encourage the use, for example, of the new councillor training modules it has developed in Asia, working closely with its associate members and interested local government training institutes.

41 CLGF, working with other partners, will support institutional strengthening of its members, especially LGAs, for example under its Good Practice Scheme. It will provide advice and seek where possible new resources to allow interested members to adopt the international local government peer review mechanism which it has successfully pioneered in Southern Africa.

42 Local government has direct responsibility for the local achievement of the MDGs and ensuring sustainable delivery of services. CLGF technical assistance programmes to its members will have as their core aim the reduction of poverty and improved service delivery, together with promotion of local democracy and good governance, seeking to strengthen professional and other skills required to achieve this.

43 The sharing of good practice and international innovations, for example on democratic practices, enhanced finances, local economic development and improved service delivery, is



at the heart of the CLGF's mandate. It will seek to strengthen the mechanisms it has at its disposal to undertake this, including regular international/regional conferences and workshops, the Good Practice Scheme, its practitioners' data base, the Forum of Inclusive Cities, the Commonwealth e-Journal of Local Governance, and its research and associate member network. Partnerships with the media will be encouraged to maximise dissemination.

44 Building on work already done by CLGF in Asia and elsewhere, CLGF should cooperate with the Commonwealth Secretariat and regional organisations, to develop a 'Gender and Local Government Action Plan' with time bound goals and indicators for local government.

45 Where possible, CLGF will seek to provide advice and support to its members, especially LGAs, to support them to dialogue with national governments and international donors with a view to being able to access funds in support of their improvement agenda and in fulfillment of the mandate provided in the 2008 *Accra Agenda* and other relevant policy statements and mechanisms. It will in cooperation with its European members and other partners continue to encourage greater local government access to EU development funds.

46 Practice oriented research should become more prominent in the work of CLGF. Evidence based policy and programmes are needed to support local government development and continuous improvement. CLGF has a significant comparative advantage as regards the mix of local government practitioners and research/training institute members, which makes it an ideal vehicle to identify research needs, disseminate findings and promote practical application. CLGF should explore in more detail how local governments learn and share knowledge, and also strengthen its capacity for knowledge management and distribution. CLGF's Research Advisory Group has a leading role to play in this endeavour.

47 All Commonwealth member states should monitor, with support from CLGF where appropriate, the implementation of the *Aberdeen Agenda*, building on the successful methodology developed in Uganda and to prepare regular reports and provide these to CLGF. CLGF, where requested by its members and working closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat and other partners, will continue to use its good offices to address problems relating to, in particular, local democratic rights, and provide technical assistance to implement reforms which are in line with the *Aberdeen Agenda*.

48 CLGF will encourage its own members, both local government and central and state/provincial government to adopt and implement the policies set out in the Freeport Declaration. It will likewise work with its many Commonwealth, UN/international and regional partners to implement the Declaration. This will also entail, with the support of its concerned members, maintaining and strengthening its existing regional structures and programmes and developing new ones where they do not yet exist.

49 CLGF will use its official accreditation to the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Trinidad to highlight the role of local government in building sustainable and equitable communities in the Commonwealth and secure CHOGM endorsement of the Freeport Declaration and of CLGF's role. It will continue to make full use of its status as the Designated Commonwealth Organisation with responsibility for local government in driving forward the improvement agenda throughout the Commonwealth and beyond.

50 CLGF will monitor implementation of the Freeport Declaration and will report back on progress and achievements at the 2011 Conference.



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