Civil society orgs call on Commonwealth, world leaders to prioritise wellbeing in pursuit of economic growth

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An alliance of international civil society organisations recognised by the Commonwealth have launched a formal Declaration on the sidelines of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Antigua & Barbuda, calling on world leaders and the Commonwealth itself to recognise the critical role that health and wellbeing have to play in enabling economic growth, as they gather to discuss what "investment for a prosperous Commonwealth" looks like.

"Prosperity Starts Here: A Commonwealth Civil Society Declaration on Wellbeing as a Pillar of Prosperity" was launched at an official event at CHOGM with the backing of organisations representing millions of civil society workers across the 56 countries of the Commonwealth, as well as activists and communities around the globe.

Across the Commonwealth, governments find themselves increasingly under pressure to demonstrate that the social market economy can continue to transform people's lives and make us all wealthier, happier and healthier. Many of the issues that dominate headlines and public discourse are about human wellbeing: anxieties over housing, the human impact of climate change, social disconnection, youth disadvantage, shrinking civil liberties, gender inequality and the threat of AI to jobs.

The Declaration highlights that in every Commonwealth country, it is civil society that is often at the forefront of identifying innovative, cost-effective solutions to these challenges. Civil society organisations have the expertise, networks and understanding necessary to deliver genuinely community-focused, sustainable interventions to some of the most complex challenges, and to build partnerships that enable governments to more effectively respond to the needs of their populations.

The Commonwealth Health Professions and Partners Alliance (CHPA) – which represents doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, social workers and dentists among others, speaking for a workforce of millions across the Commonwealth – is the driving force behind the Declaration. Many of CHPA's constituent members already deliver high impact programmes across the Commonwealth with the help of funding from governments, multinational corporations, private philanthropy or the generosity of small donors.

But global aid cuts by developed nations have greatly narrowed the support available for civil society, particularly in lower-and-middle-income countries. According to the World Health Organization, funding for global health is now at its lowest since 2012, whilst international coordinating bodies in the democracy and good governance sphere have reported that as many as 84% of their member organisations have suffered funding losses since 2024.

Through the declaration, CHPA seeks to highlight how the Commonwealth's process of accrediting pan-Commonwealth civil society organisations provides a framework for governments and funders to work with trusted, proven and reliable partners who can 'do more for less' by taking advantage of the ability of civil society to leverage existing expertise and networks to deliver change. Civil society organisations, for example, can easily and cost-effectively cascade training and education opportunities across entire workforces in lower-and-middle-income countries, leading to sustainable growth in skills and expertise that can improve health, education or other services for less than the cost of traditional aid.

The Declaration's signatories also warn that investment in wellbeing needs to be seen as a vital ingredient in unlocking growth globally, with an emerging body of evidence that rather than being a product of rising prosperity, wellbeing is a prerequisite pillar of it. Happier, healthier populations are more productive populations; happier, healthier individuals make for more resilient and cohesive communities.

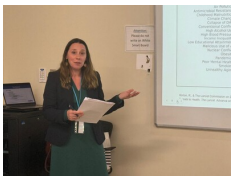
CHPA is calling on the Commonwealth and Commonwealth Governments to:

- Recognise civil society as essential partners in shaping and implementing Commonwealth and national priorities.
- Celebrate the achievements of the Commonwealth civil society ecosystem by, sharing evidence of impact and championing successful partnerships.
- Support their work by strengthening opportunities for collaboration, resource mobilisation and

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sustainable, locally led action.

- Scale up proven initiatives, connecting expertise and partnerships across countries and sectors to extend their reach and impact.

As well as CHPA members the Declaration has already been endorsed by a host of other pan-Commonwealth bodies including Common Age, the Commonwealth Jewish Council, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, Soroptimist International, the Commonwealth Consortium for Education, the Commonwealth Council for Education Administration and Management, the Commonwealth Association of Museums, and the Commonwealth Association of Architects. More are expected to follow in the coming days and weeks.

Speaking at an official event at CHOGM Victoria Rutter, Chair of CHPA and CEO of the Commonwealth Pharmacists Association (CPA) which belongs to CPA, said:

“The Commonwealth’s ecosystem of dozens of formally accredited organisations can reach millions of workers and tens of thousands of communities all over the world in ways that are much more cost-effective than a lot of traditional investment has been, but our role is often under-appreciated and our impact overlooked. CHPA is calling on Commonwealth governments to recognise that if they want to build prosperity, as per the theme of this year’s CHOGM, then they need to put human wellbeing at the centre of their plans – and partnering with civil society is one of the most cost-effective ways to do that.”

Dr. Linda Justin, Director of Common Age, said:

“A holistic approach to wellbeing means looking beyond just healthcare. Commonwealth governments need to work with civil society to deliver accessible housing, public transport and public spaces; better support for carers; action on ageism and its most pernicious form elder abuse; and programmes promoting affordable connectivity and technology. There should be opportunities for re-skilling lifelong learning, employment and volunteering; a more age-friendly culture should be entrenched; and better data collection, research and monitoring to guide the development of age-friendly policies. That's why I warmly welcome CHPA's decision to not just commission this Declaration, but to champion wider civil society as well."

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