

COMMONWEALTH PRINCIPLES ON GOOD PRACTICE FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IN BELIZE CITY

Introduction

Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) actively promotes and advocates for democratic, elected local government around the Commonwealth. The organization's commitment to democratic values is set out in the Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth principles on good practice for local democracy and good governance, which was developed and adopted at its 2005 Conference in Aberdeen, and subsequently endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government in the same year. CLGF aims to ensure that local government's role as a sphere of government is recognized and reflected nationally and internationally. It also works directly with its members to strengthen local governance structures and to develop more democratic local government.

Promotion and advocacy of local democracy and good governance

- *Constitutional and legal recognition for local democracy: local democracy should enjoy constitutional and legal recognition*

The Belize City Council has a constitutional and legal recognition. It is a statutory body formed under the Belize City Council Act. This is clearly manifested in Section 3 of the Act, which provides: "3.-(1) there shall be and is hereby constituted and established a Council to be known as the "Belize City Council" which shall be a body corporate with perpetual succession and a common seal. (2) The Council shall have capacity to acquire, hold and dispose of real and personal property and to sue and be sued in all courts of law. (3) The Council shall consist of a Mayor and ten other members duly elected in accordance with this Act and regulations made there under. (4) The Council is lawfully constituted when the requisite number of members has been elected. (5) No temporary vacancy caused by death or otherwise shall affect the Council."

Both the constitutionality and the recognition of any Local Authority are vested in both the Constitution of Belize and in Parliament. The Council is therefore constituted and recognized, once the provisions of Section 3 are fulfilled.

- *The ability to elect local representatives: citizens should be able to elect their local representatives in conditions of political freedom*

Belize is a democratic country. The local representatives are elected by the citizens in conditions of political freedom. According to Section 2 of the Belize City Council Act, “voter” means a person registered as a voter in accordance with this Act. The citizens have the right to vote and they can elect their local representatives.

According to Section 3(3) of the Belize City Council Act, “The Council shall consist of a Mayor and ten other members duly elected in accordance with this Act and regulations made thereunder.”

- *Partnerships between spheres of government, there should be cooperation and partnership among local/regional/provincial and national spheres of government*

Effective democracy demands respect between the different spheres of government and recognizes the defined roles they play in serving their citizens.

It is important to ensure that there is regular dialogue and cooperation between the different spheres. Strong intergovernmental relations will promote greater alignment of national, regional and local priorities. Significant decentralization requires cooperation and strengthened coordination between the different spheres of government.

The Belize City Council is an autonomous body, which is regulated by the Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development. It shares partnerships with the national government.

- *Defined legislative framework, local democracy should ensure local government has appropriate powers in accordance with the principle of subsidiary*

Democratic local government, with clearly defined powers, serves as the means by which the community can shape their livelihoods. There is a complete legislative framework within which the Belize City Council operates. Some of the major Acts are the Belize City Council Act, Trade Licensing Act, Towns Property Tax Act, Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Intoxicating Liquor Licensing Act, Belize City Building Act, etc.

- *Opportunity to participate in local decision-making, all citizens should be able to participate actively in local government*

Local democracy gives citizens the freedom to participate in making decisions that are locally appropriate and serve the needs of local community. Effective consultation is central to the engagement of the community in the local policy making process.

However, critical to this is a vibrant civil society and a clearly defined relationship between it and local government. It is important for local government to be proactive, and reach out to its communities to ensure that public participation is maximized. The political will to develop that relationship with its electorate must be nurtured within the local council itself.

The building of a robust relationship between local government and civil society is central to local democracy and to the development of sustainable communities. There are various ways in which the public is given the opportunity to participate in local decision making. Monthly Public Meetings is one medium, where the public can share their ideas or concerns. Other Meetings are also held with stakeholders as and when necessary. The Council's Website is another medium through which the public can send their suggestions/concerns/complaints, while appearances on local talk shows with live call-ins segments also allow meaningful public participation.

According to Regulation 3(A)1 of the Belize City Council (Standing Rules and Orders) (Amendment) Regulations, 2009, "The Council may at its discretion hold its meetings in public or in private provided that at least one ordinary sitting of the Council shall be held in public every month."

- *Open local government - accountability, local government should be accountable to the community it serves*

Local government should be accountable to the community it serves, while operating within the legal and policy framework of other spheres of government. Robust, independent regulatory bodies need to be in place to safeguard against corruption, mismanagement and the inappropriate use of resources by local government, politicians, and officials.

Civil society needs to be strengthened as a counterpart in this process. Participatory budgeting is a tool for enhancing accountability, which is also effective at training local civil society in holding their local councils to account. The Belize City Council understands the importance of accountability and is fully accountable to the citizens of Belize City.

- *Open local government – transparency: the local decision making process should be open and transparent*

The way local government makes decisions should be clear and clearly communicated to the community it serves. Local councils need to adopt a public information strategy using different media and reaching all of society. The Belize City Council holds the Monthly Public Meetings for this purpose. The citizens have the right to know the decisions made by the Council. Monthly Newsletters are also circulated.

- *Openness to scrutiny, the work of the executive should be subject to scrutiny*

Policy determined by the executive/local authority should be open to scrutiny by other elected members and appropriate civil society organizations/ community individuals. Effective leadership should welcome scrutiny both from within the local council and by the wider community.

This requires skilled Councilors and individuals in civil society able to effectively scrutinize policy and processes intelligently and constructively. At the Belize City Council, there is openness to scrutiny; anybody from the public or media can request for the different information.

- *Inclusiveness, the process of local decision-making must reflect the social, economic, environmental and cultural needs of the entire community*

Decisions should be taken at the level closest to the community to which they relate. Consultation is essential to ensure the needs of the whole community are met, especially with disadvantaged groups including women, youth, minority groups and people with disabilities, whose voices are often neglected.

The Commonwealth and the CLGF are committed to a target of no less than 30% of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors, and to developing strategies for increasing their active participation.

Commitment to downward accountability is critical to citizen engagement. Participatory planning is a tool to ensure inclusive and equitable planning. Community participation is, therefore, done under various programs, so that the actual needs of the community can be considered. The Belize City Council works along with the community. A recent example is that the Belize City Council is working with the Crime

Control Council, which helps youths by giving them temporary jobs as an effort to reduce crime.

- *Adequate and equitable resource allocation, in order to respond to the needs of the local community*

Local government must have adequate financial resources to fulfill its mandate and ensure significant autonomy in resource allocation.

An independent and secure revenue base is the key to sound management of resources, and included in this is the predictability and adequacy of financial transfers from central to local government in terms of timeliness and amounts. Such transfers must be free of political bias and a local government agreement or legal framework to govern such transfers is often of critical importance.

In the distribution of resources, local government must be seen as an integral part of the overall public sector involved in delivering key public services.

The Belize City Council depends primarily on municipal taxes, as very limited financial transfers come from central government. With the limited resources, the Council has always tried its best to respond to the needs of the local community.

- *Equitable service delivery, the distribution of services should reflect the diverse needs of the local community*

Services provided by local government should be accessible to all. The poor and marginalized, may in certain circumstances, require local government to adopt proactive policies to address their particular needs.

There is a balance to be struck between nationally set standards and locally set priorities. Local government should have the space to respond to the needs of its local area, because the local government knows the requirements better. Although the needs of the local community are diverse, the Belize City Council always tries to provide an equitable service delivery to its residents.

- *Building strong local democracy and good governance, there should be a commitment to continuous capacity development of democratic local government*

Effective leadership is central to strong local democracy. It is important to strengthen and build the capacity of Councilors, officers, and local governance institutions to ensure that local democracy can enable local government to deliver quality services to the local community. Community leadership is an important and growing role for local government in the creation of sustainable communities.

The Ministry of Local Government has adopted the concept of Good Governance. National Policy was also adopted recently. With the help of the World Bank, a project is currently running for capacity building for all the municipalities of the nation.

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