

Introduction

Dealing in Solutions, a Commonwealth Conference for young people involved in the drugs field, involved participants from 46 Commonwealth countries and dependencies sharing their experiences and opinions about effective policies and practices to counter drugs problems.

The serious international nature of this issue was reflected by Mr Shridath S. Ramphal (Commonwealth Secretary General), in his letter of invitation to countries to send participants.

'If Commonwealth citizens were asked to identify the most important issues facing their countries, it is likely that the problem of drugs would be prominent along with unemployment, poverty, rural deprivation and destruction of the environment. It is an issue of genuine concern to all people, including the young, who recognise the destructive capacity of drug abuse.

We have been exploring ways of reflecting the general Commonwealth wish that greater attention be paid to this issue. As part of this response, the Commonwealth Youth Affairs Council has now agreed that the Commonwealth Youth Programme should give priority in its work plan to the abuse of drugs by young people. An important element is a pan-Commonwealth Conference entitled 'Dealing in Solutions' especially planned for young people working in the drugs field.'

This concern has been reflected in a number of Commonwealth forums. Commonwealth Heads of Government considered a variety of actions to stem the tide of drugs problems in their meetings in Nassau (1985) and Vancouver (1987). Health Ministers and Law Ministers had considered medical and legal aspects of the issue at their respective annual meetings.

Recognising the importance of the youth perspective on what is, essentially, a young person's issue, the Commonwealth Youth Affairs Council at their meeting in Apia (1988) asked CYP staff to organise a conference for young people involved in the drugs field. The Malaysian Government offered support for the initiative through the provision of the venue and administrative and technical support.

To provide the plan for the conference, CYP invited to London, in early January, 5 young people from the different regions of the Commonwealth. Between them, they had a richly varied perspective on drugs issues.

Mohd. Ali Abu Bakar (Malaysia), Director General of Youth, Government of Malaysia.

Dr. Andrew Ball (Australia), a doctor specialising in the treatment of drug addictions.

Mr Rudi Ferguson (Bahamas), a Customs and Immigration Official in the Bahamas Government.

Ms Victoria Martin (Canada), an outreach worker with a YM/YWCA drugs programme in Victoria, Canada.

Mr Francis Phiri (Zambia), a college lecturer who, in a voluntary capacity, began an early intervention programme with young people in a compound in Lusaka.

This group, supported by CYP London staff, worked for 3 days to develop a conference plan that would ensure maximum attention to the important drugs issues and full participation of the people that attended.

72 young people gathered together at the International Youth Centre, in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur on the morning of June 12, 1989 to put the plan into action. They came from a mixture of backgrounds, including youth workers, doctors, psychologists, policy makers, probation officers, police, outreach workers, voluntary organisation staff, health workers, prevention specialists and narcotics officials. That rich mix of experiences, perspectives and opinions greatly enhanced the value of the 5 days that followed.

They were asked to work to the following objectives, as set by the Planning Group:

- (a) That participants return home with (at least two) relevant and practical ideas that they can develop to tackle specific drug issues in their countries.
- (b) That participants return home with (at least two) relevant policy ideas they feel enthused about proposing for adoption by policy makers in their countries.
- (c) That the conference agrees on a communique to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Malaysia (October 1989) for pan-Commonwealth action on this issue.

These objectives reflect the intended focus of the conference. The primary emphasis was to be on the participants exchanging views and opinions about appropriate down-to-earth actions that could be taken. This was to be backed up with consideration of appropriate policies that could support that ground-level action. However, there was also a recognition that the drugs problem had to be tackled as a major political problem. As such the youth perspective on broad policy initiatives needed to be communicated to Government leaders. The meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government in Kuala Lumpur five months after the conference provided an ideal opportunity for this. It was on these objectives that participants went 'to work'.

The content of this report follows the structure of the conference.

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Each section of the conference followed a particular format that was developed by the planning group. The first part of each section of this report outlines what that format was. The ideas and issues developed and discussed by the participants follow and form the major component of each section.

As has already been indicated, this was not a conference that was designed to produce agreement on the perfect approach to drugs problems. There is no such thing. So, the style of the conference was participative. People were given maximum opportunity to share ideas, discuss issues and contemplate new approaches to the problem.

To assist the process it was the participants who played the important roles in the conference. They chaired plenary sessions, formed the panels, facilitated regional and work groups, took the notes and wrote the communique. With the exception of the opening ceremony there were no outside speakers. Participants were fully involved.

This approach is reflected in the content of the report. It comprehensively records the variety of contributions made by the participants in their working group, regional group and plenary discussions. Consequently, some of the points contradict each other and there are no, with the exception of the communique, formal sets of recommendations. Each individual took what was relevant to them in their situation.

The report is completed by appendices that provide background information about the event:

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This was a dynamic, relevant and exciting event.
We hope that this report conveys those qualities.

