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Livingstone Sewanyana

I am Livingstone Sewanyana, Executive Director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative, a national human rights civic advocacy group based here in Kampala, Uganda. I am a Lawyer by profession having specialised in International Human Rights Law. Foundation for Human Rights Initiative has been in the field of human rights now for almost 16 years, although I have been preoccupied with human rights for about 25 years.

I have been to many countries in Africa, Asia, North and South America, the Caribbean, East and Central Asia including Latin America. I have had experience with so many of these countries where human rights actually varies greatly in terms of perception, practice, action. Human rights in the Commonwealth countries has not had equal consideration, in some countries there are serious contradictions.

In a country like Britain, respect for human dignity is something they value a lot whereas a country like Zimbabwe, where the Harare Declaration of 1991 was actually proclaimed, it borders on serious abuse, where the sanctity of life and the wealth of the human person are seriously being undermined. India is a very big democracy. Although it is a world of differences, the rich and the poor, at least in terms of policy there is a deliberate effort to upscale people's engagement with the State and the voices of the people are heard and respected. In Canada, the degree to which human rights is respected and upheld both in theory and practice is very high.

So there is a great variation among nations and these can be attributed to many factors. To what extent does the leadership appreciate values of human rights in both policy and practice? It could also depend to the extent to which the State or the country in question has undergone modernisation. Countries that seem to have modernised within the Commonwealth seem to appreciate the value of life because they have overcome some of the major challenges – challenges of illiteracy, challenges of poverty, and challenges of disease.

So it's very understandable the reason why many countries in the Commonwealth still lag behind the pace that Britain has set, can be attributed to many factors. One – the scale or the degree to which Britain is industrialised. Because of industrialisation, many people in the U.K can actually afford basic necessities of life. Its infrastructure is highly developed and therefore it can be able to set standards in health, standards in education which sharply contradict with other member countries of the Commonwealth.

Where the state appreciates and respects the wishes of the people, you have a close nexus between the two. For example what does it mean for people to enjoy their right to vote? It only happens where those institutions that have been put in place respect the outcome of the votes. What does it mean to have freedom of the media including the freedom to express oneself? It means that people are allowed to make choices including airing those views that the State may find undesirable.

So the interface between governance and rights is all about opportunity, it's about empowerment, it's about choices. And on the other hand, it's about obligations of the State being fulfilled by the State in question. When that happens there is a clear linkage between the two and actually you have democracy. Within the Commonwealth family there are a number of civil society organisations that have developed over the years. In fact the Commonwealth is a model for civil society action.

There are millions of organisations ranging from children's organisations, prisoners welfare, environmental protection, issues to do with media freedom, matters that actually border on everyday life being pursued by various organisations within the Commonwealth. Well when they adopted the Harare Declaration in 1991 there was a clear appreciation at least at the level of theory and ritually that indeed human rights matter, because they are very well enshrined in that Declaration and also when you look at the various constitutions of countries within the Commonwealth there is an aspiration.

The contradiction however occurs when we look at the practice that States, though in their constitutions, though in international conventions, they have signified their commitment, in practice it varies because of the need to maintain power, to maintain various political, economic and social interests and sometimes because of you know inadequacies in terms of resource allocation. However I must state that there is a long way to go within the Commonwealth for them to appreciate the role of civil society organisations in defending and advocating for rights.

The challenges are many and are far between. Preaching sometimes to people who are hungry, people who have no voice is very difficult. Countries where there are high levels of poverty, human rights tend not to be well appreciated. Countries which are under some form of military or quasi-military leadership, there are serious challenges with those countries because the approach to issues, the understanding of issues varies a lot. They believe in the use of force and of course rights are all about respect, they are all about dialogue.

There are also other challenges related to issues that there seem not to be clear consensus on. For example advocating for abolition of the death penalty – because of divided opinion where in some countries they believe within the Commonwealth that capital punishment is all about deterrence, there is a very clear difference in opinion with countries which believe that death penalty actually does not amount to deterrence. But I must say that by and large the challenges border on ignorance, illiteracy, poverty and many times the levels of development within these countries.

For the ordinary person within the Commonwealth, his needs are basic. He wants to have his children actually in school and good schools for that matter. He wants to be sure that his family and his family members access good health and can go to hospital which is accessible. The doctors are available and there is medicine, he or she wants to make sure that the roads are passable; they are actually accessible even during El Nino. He wants to market his products at competitive prices that actually are commensurate with his energy. He wants to make sure that his children or our children actually get jobs when they get out of school and he wants to make sure that he is safe, there is security.

Now his role there is one - of course he pays taxes, make sure that happens and he must ensure that the State accounts to him or to her in the delivery of those services. When the State abdicates its responsibility in delivering that service, it in one way or the other neglects the power, the opinion of the ordinary person. So for the ordinary person in the Commonwealth, he just needs to be guaranteed

security, health, education, his voice to be heard and to make sure that the State delivers on infrastructure which is very important for his or her welfare development.

Dear listeners, I invite you to subscribe to this blog, to participate, air your views, send in your comments because they are very important in ensuring that the debate continues. We and the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative will be organising the Commonwealth Human Rights Forum where a lot of issues will be discussed that should feed into the actual summit. You are all welcome to subscribe.