



Musings of a CommonAge delegate to the Commonwealth Peoples Forum at CHOGM 2024

I am deeply grateful to have attended the Commonwealth Peoples Forum in Samoa, as a CommonAge delegate sponsored by the Commonwealth Foundation. It was my first experience of CHOGM and my first visit to the Pacific Islands. Reflecting on it now still gives me goosebumps.

Samoa, the Island



My arrival in Samoa was nothing short of breath –taking!

My first view of the island was the aquamarine coral reef surrounding the coast, colliding with the lush emerald green plantations as the plane glided onto the airstrip. The image is etched in my memory forever.

The drive from my Airbnb, Salty Lodge, in Mulifanua village to Apia on Day 1 of the Commonwealth People’s Forum (CPF) had me sitting on the edge of my seat as I tried to absorb the many beautiful spaces created by the locals who had painted fences, gates and large pebbles on the kerb, in the colours depicting each Commonwealth country – the villages’ attempt to pay homage to their global guests.

The people of Samoa are as warm as their weather is. They each embodied the public service tagline; “Talofa with a smile.” From the ground staff at Faleolo International Airport to the shuttle drivers, hotel reception at Tanoa Tusitala (venue of the CPF) to the staff at Salty Lodge, I found the people to be friendly, helpful and kind.



At Salty Lodge with the caring staff!

I returned to Salty Lodge around 8.30pm on Day 1, due to a snag with transport – it was heart-warming to find the concerned manager at Salty Lodge rush out to receive me. It felt good to have someone look out for me **15,000kms** away from home.

Commonwealth Peoples Forum

Being able to listen to experts and thought leaders in the world of climate change, health and media and hearing a synergy in their message was at the same time, incredible and encouraging. It opened my thinking to aspects of the climate change crises that I had not previously realised.



Panel Discussion on “Dementia in the Commonwealth” with (L to R) Linda Justin (Director), Mansur Dalal (Chairperson), Jaqueline Daitin Wong (Vice – Chair), Douladel Tyndale (delegate) & me.

I was honoured to participate in the delegate led session on *Dementia in the Commonwealth*, with my esteemed colleagues from CommonAge, Mansur Dalal (Chairperson), Linda Justin (Director), Jaqueline Daitin Wong (Vice – Chair) and Douladel Tyndale (delegate from the Caribbean). The session focused on the increased prevalence of Dementia, its impact on the individual, families and communities and workforce challenges. It was well received by the 44 attendees.

Sadly, the challenges facing older persons did not receive much attention at the Peoples Forum. Given the fact that most countries in the Commonwealth have a growing ageing population, the need to prepare for the health, environmental and economic implications of this should have placed older persons higher up on the agenda.



The Team with Dame Carol Black

The only other significant initiative around older persons was the launch of the “Roadmap to Ageing Well” by Dame Carol Black, the Commonwealth Secretary General’s Special Envoy to Ageing Well.

I also noted, as a representative of the African continent, that there was miniscule representation from Africa on the panel discussions. I addressed it in passing with a member of the Foundation who explained that it was probably due to the emphasis for 2024 being on small island countries and the Pacific. Made sense!

On the whole, this global gathering of diverse cultural groups was well organized - hats off to the Commonwealth Foundation, government officials and people of Samoa.

The Learnings

Session after session I listened deeply to young climate change activists share their ideas on actions to curb the climate crises. It was equally enlightening to hear experts with experience, outline issues of health injustice and the threats to freedom of expression.

My key takeaways included the following:

“The well-being of humanity is inextricably intertwined with the well-being of the climate.”

- Hon. Minister Fiame Naomi Mata’afa, Prime Minister of Samoa.

Minister Fiame explained that it's no longer just about the climate but it's about the survival of humanity. The sense of urgency around climate change is firmly embedded in communities of the Pacific - something we can learn to emulate in South Africa.

Anne Gallagher (Director General – Commonwealth Foundation) emphasized that the CPF promotes community and civil society involvement in creating solutions from the ground up, which is aligned to the spirit of *Fa 'asamoa* within the Samoan culture, meaning; ***“the greatest strength lies in community.”***



Ms. Brianna Fruean

My favourite quote of the Peoples Forum would have to be from Ms. Brianna Fruean, a 26-year-old environmental advocate for Samoa, who is wise beyond her years. She said;

“I have vision because my grandparents have memory. A fossil- fuel free Pacific is not just a vision but there is memory that it can exist.”

Elders play a key role in providing solutions to health and climate challenges because of their indigenous knowledge, life experience and wisdom. Leaders must consult indigenous people on climate actions because different geographical regions have different realities and first peoples are thousands of years old in land and sea practices. Indigenous people should be leaders in climate actions and not victims of climate policies.

Road Ahead

Having had the privilege of attending the CPF, I understand the significance of its contribution to CHOGM and global priorities. I plan to share my learnings with national and regional networks, strengthen relationships with new connections formed at CPF, explore opportunities for collaboration, lobby National Government to support the development of a National Plan on Dementia and work with older person organisations to integrate into our service offerings, aspects of the Dementia Report and Roadmap to Ageing Well.

Attendance at the CPF in the beautiful Pacific Island of Samoa was a powerful learning experience that has strengthened my resolve to collaborate across geographical boundaries and sectoral divides to drive the health agenda for older persons and all people in the Commonwealth, as per the Commonage vision, which is to work towards an all-age friendly Commonwealth.

I am deeply grateful for this privilege. ***Fa' afetai!***

- **By Carmel Murugen, Delegate**