

# Evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21

September 2022



The Commonwealth

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EVALUATION SERIES 123

# Evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2017/18-2020/21



The Commonwealth

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| AEO       | Authorised Economic Operator (scheme)                      |
| BELTRAIDE | Belize Trade and Investment Development Service            |
| BOG       | Board of Governors   |
| B2B       | business-to-business                                       |
| CACH      | Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health                  |
| CALL      | Climate Action on Living Lands (Commonwealth initiative)   |
| CBD       | Convention on Biological Diversity                         |
| CCA       | Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda                           |
| CEN       | Commonwealth Electoral Network                             |
| CFTC      | Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation               |
| CHOGM     | Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting                   |
| CNMF      | Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation                |
| COP26     | 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference              |
| CTMM      | Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting                       |
| EBR       | extra-budgetary resources                                  |
| ELECAM    | Elections Cameroon (Cameroon's election management body)   |
| EU        | European Union   |
| EYSD      | Economic, Youth and Sustainable Development (Directorate)  |
| FEAFFA    | Federation of East African Freight Forwarders Associations |
| GPD       | Governance and Peace Directorate                           |
| HR        | human resources  |
| ICT       | information and communication technology                   |
| IGO       | intergovernmental organisation                             |
| IISD      | International Institute for Sustainable Development        |
| IMF       | International Monetary Fund                                |
| IP        | Impact Pathway   |
| KM        | Knowledge management                                       |
| LDC       | least developed country                                    |
| M&E       | monitoring and evaluation                                  |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| MEL      | monitoring, evaluation and learning                    |
| MNM      | Malaria No More  |
| MoU      | Memorandum of Understanding                            |
| MSMEs    | micro, small and medium-sized enterprises              |
| NCD      | non-communicable disease                               |
| NDP      | national development plan                              |
| NES      | National Export Strategy (Belize)                      |
| OECD     | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| OECS     | Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States               |
| RBM      | results-based management                               |
| SDGs     | Sustainable Development Goals                          |
| SIEC     | Solomon Islands Election Commission                    |
| SMEs     | small and medium-sized enterprises                     |
| SPC      | Secretariat of the Pacific Community                   |
| SPPDD    | Strategy, Portfolio, Partnerships and Digital Division |
| STOM     | senior trade officials meeting                         |
| SVS      | small and other vulnerable states                      |
| ToC      | Theory of Change                                       |
| ToT      | training of trainers                                   |
| TONR     | Trade, Oceans and Natural Resources (Directorate)      |
| UN       | United Nations   |
| UNCCD    | United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification    |
| UNFCCC   | United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change  |
| UVP      | unique value proposition                               |
| VAWG/GBV | violence against women and girls/gender-based violence |
| WTO      | World Trade Organization                               |

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Although stakeholders were engaged and listened to throughout the evaluation, this was an independent review, hence the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the evaluators and do not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Evaluators

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction and overview

The Strategy, Portfolio, Partnerships and Digital Division (SPPDD) of the Commonwealth Secretariat commissioned this independent evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat's current Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21 with the main purpose of contributing valuable insights to the development of the next Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25. To ensure it could meet this purpose, despite significant delays and constraints, the evaluation was reframed post-inception to take an explicit forward-looking lens.

The evaluation questions listed in the inception report were reframed to become forward looking and learning focused, organised around five dimensions or areas of change identified through the mapping and clustering of recurrent findings from strategy evaluations and reviews conducted in the past 15 years: (1) strategic focus and synergy; (2) strategic leveraging of core assets and mandate; (3) strategic resourcing and budgeting; (4) strategic evaluation and learning; and (5) effective organisation. The five dimensions were integrated into an evaluative Theory of Change (ToC) with the Impact Pathways of the next Strategic Plan mapped to assess their value for evidence-based learning about cross-programmatic contribution to impact (see [Figure 2.1](#) in [Section 2.2](#)). A multi-case study of selected initiatives was conducted alongside the ToC as potential 'signposts of the future'. The cases were carefully selected (drawing on an agreed set of criteria) in close consultation with the Secretariat's Senior Management, its Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit, and the internal Evaluation Reference Group.

Two important contextual factors were considered by this evaluation that had a significant influence on the Secretariat's ability to deliver results during the current Strategic Plan. One was the decline in discretionary funding from member countries; the other was the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evaluation took a theory-based and utilisation-focused approach, which combined and cross-checked sources and methods and cross-validated findings with internal and external stakeholders to support learning and uptake for adaptive management.

## Main findings

### Focus and synergy

*How do member countries individually and collectively mostly benefit from the Secretariat's work, and how does its work align with the Commonwealth Charter values and principles and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? How can the Secretariat deliver on member countries' priorities and agreed focus, while synergistically achieving bigger and sustained change?*

What the Secretariat aims to achieve with an average of £31.3 million per year is extremely ambitious and its incredible work deserves acknowledgement. This evaluation found that, through the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21, the Secretariat worked effectively to incubate change with limited resources, creating tangible benefits for the member countries while also expanding the potential for achieving impact through scaling in or out to other countries in the region or the entire Commonwealth.

It synergistically combines consensus building with tactical technical support to member countries and knowledge sharing and networking between member countries in order to develop shared 'good governance' standards and progressively influence change in policy/legislation, institutions and systems in areas as wide as: democracy and the rule of law, trade and competitiveness, youth and jobs, health and education, gender and social inclusion, climate resilience and the protection of oceans and land, and much more. To achieve all this, it works across the different levels of the Commonwealth system (the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting [CHOGM], intergovernmental ministerial meetings and action groups, national officials and institutions, and global, regional and national partners) to identify, promote and embed change, while injecting small-budget technical support for tools and platforms where there is an unmet need and an opportunity for scaling in/out. Its work delivers against 13 of the 17 SDGs and operationalises and exemplifies the values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter and the 2030 Agenda in its ways of working. Throughout the strategy period, the Secretariat maintained a strong reputation as a global intergovernmental organisation.

However, the evaluation also found that the Secretariat falls short on demonstrating results at the outcome and impact levels. By being highly demand driven and working across almost the entire development spectrum and value chain, the Secretariat is spreading itself too thinly and runs the risk of losing its comparative advantage in the already overcrowded intergovernmental development space. Its attempt to streamline and narrow down its Strategic Outcome areas over the past two Strategic Plans has not yet yielded the desired effect: even within these areas, it has continued facing an ever-growing list of member country demands in the face of ever-shrinking access to discretionary funding. This signals the need to define and achieve greater focus in a radically different way, based on a clear and unified vision and a unique value proposition (UVP).

### Leveraging of core assets and mandate

*How effective is the Secretariat in leveraging its convening power, innovation and expertise, and strategic partnerships? What can the Secretariat learn from working under COVID-19 constraints to improve its delivery model for achieving its Strategic Outcomes?*

This evaluation explored and confirmed through its case study review how the Secretariat could incubate change by leveraging its core assets and mandate through various tactical 'ways of working', for example:

- building trust-based relationships and 'niche' know-how for technical 'gap filling' in member countries;
- using convening power and drawing on technical credibility for multidimensional consensus building (for example, through 'full cycle' member country feedback and multistakeholder dialogue); and
- combining historical and political capital with strategic partnerships for cross-geographic scaling in/out of innovation and policy influence across multiple levels of governance.

These 'ways of working' present elements of good practice that are worth further exploring and modelling in the next Strategic Plan as the basis for developing an organisational Theory of Change and impact learning agenda (as further discussed in point 4 in [Box 1.1](#) in Section 1).

For instance, the Secretariat strategically uses its convening power to create 'a table for difficult conversations' that paves the way to global consensus building and enables major global SDG-related breakthroughs, notably in the development of the Call to Action on Land, the Blue Charter, the Climate Finance Access Hub and the 'Commonwealth says no more' one-stop shop on violence against women and girls (VAWG). In an ongoing case of 'scaling out', the Secretariat is embedding a targeted piece of low-budget, pump-priming support for national mental health legislation in The Bahamas into a regional process of ministerial legislative deliberation and change for improved mental health policy. Similarly, in a notable case of 'scaling in', also ongoing, the Secretariat is using its convening power to drill down the delivery of co-ordinated and accelerated climate action into the member countries through memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the three Rio Conventions on desertification (the UN Convention to Combat Desertification [UNCCD]), biodiversity (the Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD]) and climate change (the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC]) and with regional organisations. The Secretariat's Climate Change Section is currently advocating for this role through consultations on a draft Commonwealth Living Lands Charter, developed through a series of regional and bilateral consultations in the run up to the next CHOGM and the UN Climate Change Conference 2021 (COP26).

Although the Secretariat was able to digitally adapt and respond with great agility to member countries' shifting needs and demands under COVID-19 constraints, the effectiveness of its ways of working was hampered by the pandemic. In the cases examined by this evaluation, technical support suffered from connectivity problems and workflow interruptions in the countries. In addition, the Secretariat's convening and momentum towards consensus was to some extent and on some occasions impacted due to the postponement of meetings and limitations of online participation. The 17 high-level ministerial meetings and more than 7,000 virtual meetings held between March 2020 and May 2021, on the other hand, show how the Secretariat was able to swiftly adapt to the COVID-19 situation and make its ways of working even more inclusive. Like many other multilateral organisations, the Secretariat will draw positive lessons from its experiences in the next Strategic Plan to further improve and better adapt its ways

of working (for example, in terms of how to further adapt cross-purpose, cross-level and cross-stakeholder convening to the needs of a digitalising Commonwealth; and how to use online sharing of data, knowledge and tools and real-time partner mapping as a means of innovating and building partnerships that can complement, expand and deepen the Secretariat's reach and influence).

There was a widespread consensus among Secretariat management that working collaboratively as a trusted partner to the member countries was at the heart of its approach. Moreover, there was also a recognition of the need to invest in building strategic partnerships beyond project tactics and beneficiary relationships. An impressive range of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and Commonwealth network partnerships have been developed in past years, with the expectation that these will contribute to innovation and bigger impact. However, management and staff do not have the capacity to utilise and leverage these strategic partnerships as a core asset in their programmes, pressured as they are to respond to ever-increasing member country demands and delivering short-term products. This is a structural problem that the Secretariat will not resolve by getting more resources, but only by gaining greater focus and investing in organisational learning around how to build transformative partnerships in prioritised investment areas.

## Resourcing and budgeting

*To what extent are the Secretariat's resource allocations fit for purpose in relation to the ambitions as expressed through its Strategic Outcomes? How are resources and budgets assessed, developed and approved to match the strategic and programmatic ambitions?*

An important finding from the 2020 Mid-Term Review, reconfirmed by the case studies in this evaluation, concerns the improvement needed to the planning and budgeting system to enable Secretariat management and staff to plan and work more strategically. The budget allocation process is still seen by staff as being opaque. Staff often lack information about available budgets, how to access them and how higher-level decisions around the allocations are made. This nurtures insecurity and distrust.

Middle management, moreover, is heavily burdened by small project-based reporting requirements and bureaucracy, leaving little time for more strategic planning for results towards achieving higher-level outcomes. Making the system less bureaucratic, more transparent, longer term (biennial) and better aligned with the CHOGMs would help to resolve many of the challenges that inhibit the leveraging of the Secretariat's core assets and mandate.

This evaluation additionally echoed the Mid-Term Review's conclusion that the Secretariat should be more strategic in its approach to human resourcing, talent acquisition and retention, as well as organisational development. Its technical 'niche' know-how is a core asset that underpins its credibility and reputation as a trusted partner, enabling fast-track backstopping and engagement of high-capacity consultants/partners. Retainment of high-quality staff contributes to building the institutional memory and profile, and encourages staff investment in learning and innovation. Hence the importance of strategically balancing longer-term core competency development (linked to internal career paths) and shorter-term expert acquisition (linked to opportunities for learning and advancement).

## Evaluation and learning

*What are the gaps/issues in how the Secretariat applies its Impact Pathways to assess and improve its performance and impact? How can the Impact Pathways be improved and used for evidence-based learning about the gendered contribution to impact in ways that encourage collaboration and synergies across the organisation?*

The Secretariat has an evaluation strategy and long-term plan covering the current Strategic Plan period. The Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit in SPPDD has helped the organisation to make a shift towards results-based programming in the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21. Managers and staff across the organisation understand the importance of 'managing for results' and have invested in building internal capacity for results-based monitoring and evaluation (M&E). There was an M&E plan and an M&E budget, and this has helped to build an organisation-wide understanding and demand for M&E. However, evidence mapping of 2013/14–2019/20 evaluations reveals that while this significant investment in results-based

management (RBM) has generated strong evidence of its effectiveness at the output level, evidence of outcome- and impact-level results, in particular of the Secretariat's technical support, remains weak.

Acknowledging this, there is a clear need and demand for better evidence that is focused on how and where the Secretariat can make a big difference, the few 'big-ticket' items where it must demonstrate impact in the coming period. 'Better evidence' should enable the Board and Senior Management to build sufficient commitment among Commonwealth stakeholders to collectively deliver on this ambition. This evaluation therefore strongly supports the Secretariat's plan to redesign its M&E system and move towards a theory-based approach in the next strategy period 2021/22–2024/25, one that is more utilisation focused, enables organisational learning across programmatic areas and levels, and enables strong leadership and bold decision-making at the highest level.

## Effective organisation

*To what extent are the Secretariat's governance, structure and culture fit for purpose to deliver on its ambitions in a fast-changing environment? How can the Secretariat better respond to the organisational issues affecting its delivery raised in the Mid-Term Review (MTR) and previous evaluations? How can gender be better mainstreamed in its work and organisation?*

As alluded to above (under 'resourcing and budgeting'), middle management tends to be more occupied with procedural approvals for the smallest expenditures than with 'strategic direction setting' for their programmes, due to ongoing inefficiencies in the planning and budgeting system. Despite the improvement made with the quarterly performance review meetings and the investments in management capacity building, underspending and weak (financial) planning and performance persist.

With audits being conducted on average bimonthly and board meetings held on average monthly, corporate governance was found to be too controlling, too bureaucratic and lacking the agility needed to operate effectively in fast-changing contexts. Widely shared among stakeholders was also the perception of an apparent breakdown in trust between the Board and Senior Management, which puts the future of the organisation and the Commonwealth as a whole at risk.

The organisational structure and culture were seen as being unbalanced and discouraging of cross-divisional collaboration and alignment. Issues around human resources (HR) management have affected staff morale. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the Secretariat has shown great care for its staff. Moving into the new strategy period, plans are being made for HR and organisational development to address the issues raised by the MTR and this evaluation.

The Secretariat has undertaken important steps to integrate gender and youth into its programming and organisation. Mainstreaming, however, remains rather weak and systematic M&E of such mainstreaming is largely absent. An integrated and centrally managed approach is still lacking.

## Main recommendations

The new Strategic Plan provides a wonderful opportunity to build on the achievements of the current period and respond to the challenges moving forward. Based on the above findings, this evaluation proposes the following recommendations, mapped to the five dimensions or areas of change covered:

### Focus and synergy

1. Organise an externally facilitated and inclusive process (preferably in an offline event) at the start of the new strategy period (and before the next Mid-Term Review) to:
  - o build shared vision and intent among Commonwealth leadership (including, at the highest level) about how to unleash the potential power of the Commonwealth's unique and historical identity and role as a 'force for good';
  - o create clarity and alignment around the Secretariat's unique value proposition (UVP) and core mandate; and
  - o adopt an organisation-wide UVP-centred and thematically prioritised approach to identify the few big investment topics on which the Secretariat will need to 'move the needle' and develop coherent and joined-up programmes to demonstrate its contribution to impact.

Since the Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 has already been provisionally approved by the Board of Governors (BoG or 'the Board'), the

process will need to inform a mid-strategic period pivot and therefore will need to happen *before* the Mid-Term Review of the Strategic Plan (in order to avoid running from one evaluation into the other without making a significant breakthrough on this point).

The process will need to go beyond the classic reviews and consultations, and take a highly collaborative and outcome-focused approach, engaging a cross-section of internal and external stakeholders (including senior and middle management, members of BoG, key strategic partners, and a few 'critical friends' who understand the unique history and identity of the Commonwealth and can bring an unbiased external perspective to the discussions).

2. The next CHOGM will mark an important moment for the process. Echoing the recommendation of the second 2018 report of the High Level Group on Governance,<sup>1</sup> the Secretariat will need to prepare and assist the Commonwealth Heads of Government to identify the few topics on which it can and will need to 'move the needle' in the coming period (triangulating priorities related to the SDGs, COVID-19 recovery, small states' resilience and the Commonwealth's unique role in the world).

### Leveraging of core assets and mandate

3. As part of the above process, develop a shared understanding of the Secretariat's core assets and of how these could be renewed and leveraged in the changing world to enable the Secretariat to deliver and demonstrate its contribution to impact on the big-ticket items.
4. Draw on the evidence from this and other recent evaluations to inform this discussion and reach agreement around a selective set of models of 'ways of working' that the Secretariat should use and adapt moving forward. Develop a learning agenda and guidance for staff and partners to pilot-test and adapt these models across the prioritised big-ticket areas. An important

topic for evidence-based learning in the next Strategic Plan will be how the Secretariat's combined knowledge generation and sharing, technical assistance, and consensus building could become more effective and better address the challenges of working in a digitalised world.

5. Strengthen the Secretariat's Innovations and Partnerships Unit to:
  - o develop strategic partnerships and collaborations (beyond tactical beneficiary relationships) that concretely help Secretariat units expand their reach and influence in the prioritised topic areas, beyond the scope of what they can do on their own;
  - o build 'strategic partnership' competency across the organisation, embedded in organisational learning around leveraging core assets; and
  - o construct a baseline for the prioritised big-ticket topics (for example, drawing on Commonwealth big data) as the basis for identifying hot spots for impact-focused 'gap filling'.

### Resourcing and budgeting

6. Sharpen the focus and strategically align the programme portfolios around the prioritised big-ticket areas. Strategically invest in strengthening the Secretariat's in-house technical competencies, while also attracting external talent to develop and test the new models to revamp and leverage core assets in the prioritised areas.
7. Put in place a human resourcing, talent acquisition and retainment, and organisational development strategy centred on these prioritised big-ticket areas, balancing longer-term core competency development (linked to internal career paths) and shorter-term expert acquisition (linked to opportunities for learning and advancement). Consider including a review of the rotation policy as a retention strategy.
8. Ensure realistic budgeting in these few priority areas, based on a credible design, costing and appraisal of investments needed to build the know-how and competencies to deliver on the priorities and demonstrate impact.

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<sup>1</sup> See: The High Level Group on the Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat (2018), Second Report, December, p 6.

## Evaluation and learning

- 9 Put in place an organisation-wide strategic evaluative learning agenda to demonstrate the contribution and impact of coherent and joined-up programmes and to test and adapt combined 'ways of working' models in the above big-ticket areas.
10. Develop an adaptive, contribution- and utilisation-focused M&E-for-learning (or MEL) approach that:
  - o draws on an organisational Theory of Change that links Impact Pathways and organisational enablers;
  - o defines the models and their Impact Pathways in terms of clear stages of development that can be tracked and shared on an institutional impact dashboard;
  - o is centred on the core set of prioritised big-ticket items to develop an organisation-wide evaluative learning culture;
  - o has (bi-)annual moments for cross-unit reflection and learning around how the Secretariat's programmes combine and integrate the Impact Pathways, builds cross-programmatic linkages and synergies, and develops innovative and adaptive delivery models backed by strategic partnerships and innovation;
  - o uses methods and tools that are easy, light and fun to use and help programme teams to generate and use better evidence that is inclusive, credible, gender responsive and empowering; and
  - o generates the type of evidence useful for higher-level decision and interaction with the Board.

## Effective organisation

11. Continue simplifying and streamlining planning and budget approval processes, and strengthening (financial) planning and performance.
12. Downsize and streamline RBM and planning and budgeting systems to make room for evaluative and organisational learning.
13. Consider a rethink of the organisational structure to better connect 'strategy, evaluation and learning' with gender (and youth) mainstreamed programme delivery, and assign organisational mainstreaming responsibilities to a cross-cutting youth and gender unit.
14. Build leadership competencies and develop clear standards for downward accountability and transparency.
15. Develop a strategic approach to human resourcing, talent acquisition and retainment, and organisational development, and intentionally rebuild staff morale and responsibility (see also Recommendation 7).
16. Engage selective Board members in the facilitated process of revamping the Secretariat's core mandate, assets and value proposition (see also Recommendations 1 and 2). Ideally, this also involves a thought process to redefine and rebalance internal stakeholder roles and responsibilities (including those of the BoG) for more effective delivery on priorities in volatile contexts.



# 1. Introduction and Objectives

This report summarises the findings and recommendations from an independent evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21 commissioned by its Strategy, Portfolio, Partnerships and Digital Division (SPPDD). The evaluation was undertaken between March and November 2021, with the main purpose of contributing valuable insights to the development of the next Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25. To meet this purpose, it was expected to assess, draw lessons and make recommendations on:<sup>1</sup>

- 'impact', 'effectiveness' and 'sustainability', to be considered in terms of the benefits and tangible outcomes of the Secretariat's interventions for Commonwealth member countries, and its adaptation to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- 'relevance' and 'coherence' in strategic planning and programming, to be looked at in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Commonwealth Charter alignment and context responsiveness from the previous to the present strategy periods; and
- 'efficiency', defined as 'organisational effectiveness' obtained through operationalising partnerships, gender mainstreaming, and the use of evaluations and Impact Pathways as instruments for enhancing organisational learning and performance.

Given the breadth of the Secretariat's work, its wide geography, the complexity of its mandates and of the Commonwealth itself, and the limited resources for the evaluation, it wasn't expected to address all six Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria (impact, effectiveness, sustainability, relevance, coherence and efficiency) at great length and depth. Much had already been tackled in the 2020 Mid-Term Review (which took place only 1 year before this evaluation). Hence the

evaluation focused merely on particular elements (as indicated in the objectives above).

Some changes were made to the design presented in the inception report, agreed with the evaluation reference group and senior managers post-inception. Many of the Secretariat's directors and programme managers were new and therefore more excited about the future rather than the past. Hence there was an explicit desire among Senior Management for this evaluation to be more pragmatic and focused on where there is real potential and appetite for change. To ensure the evaluation could meet the main purpose, despite the multiple delays (as described in [Section 2.4](#)), and at the same time also capitalise on this organisational readiness for change, it was reframed post-inception to take an explicit forward-looking lens. The overarching questions it sought to answer were:

*Given the Secretariat's limited size and budget, how could it achieve greater focus moving forward? How could it best harness its intergovernmental nature and its specific mandate and expertise in democratic governance for sustainable development? Given its unique history, value and niche, what type and level of impact should it aim for?*

The evaluation questions listed in the inception report were reframed to become forward looking and learning focused, organised around five dimensions of change identified through the mapping and clustering of recurrent findings from strategy evaluations and reviews conducted in the last 15 years:

1. Strategic focus and synergy
2. Strategic resourcing and budgeting
3. Strategic leveraging of core assets and mandate
4. Strategic evaluation and learning
5. Effective organisation

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<sup>1</sup> This can be found in the inception report.



## Box 1.1. Reframing and clustering the evaluation questions to take a forward-looking lens

### 1. Strategic focus and synergy to achieve relevant and sustained outcomes and impact

How do member countries individually and collectively mostly benefit from the Secretariat's work, and how does its work align with the Commonwealth Charter values and principles and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? How can the Secretariat deliver on member countries' priorities and agreed focus, while synergistically achieving bigger and sustained change?

### 2. Strategic leveraging of core assets and mandate to enhance the Commonwealth system

How effective is the Secretariat in leveraging its convening power, innovation and expertise and strategic partnerships? What can the Secretariat learn from working under COVID-19 constraints to improve its delivery model for achieving its Strategic Outcomes?

### 3. Strategic resourcing and budgeting to match the strategic and programmatic ambitions

To what extent are the Secretariat's resource allocations fit for purpose in relation to its ambitions, as expressed through its Strategic Outcomes? How are resources and budgets assessed, developed and approved to match the strategic and programmatic ambitions?

### 4. Strategic evaluation and learning to enable better resourcing and management for impact

What are the gaps/issues in how the Secretariat applies its Impact Pathways to assess and improve its performance and impact? How can the Impact Pathways be improved and used for evidence-based learning about gendered contribution to impact, in ways that encourage collaboration and synergies across the organisation?

### 5. Effective organisation to enable better internal and external collaboration and performance

To what extent are the Secretariat's governance, structure and culture fit for purpose to deliver on its ambitions in a fast-changing environment? How can the Secretariat better respond to the organisational issues affecting its delivery, raised in the Mid-Term Review and previous evaluations? How can gender be better mainstreamed in its work and organisation?

These five dimensions are closely interlinked and present the Secretariat's internal (organisational) enablers for delivering desired programmatic outcomes. The reframed questions (presented in [Box 1.1](#)) served to guide the evaluation in generating the above-mentioned insights that would help the Secretariat make decisions on how to move forward in each of these five areas in the next Strategic Plan.

The report is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the evaluation methodology, including the Theory of Change tool that guided data

collection and analysis. Section 3 presents the main findings and conclusions for each of the above five dimensions. Section 4 summarises the Secretariat's major achievements and the lessons learned, and formulates a key set of recommendations for the strategy period 2021/22–2024/25. The Annexes comprise: an overview of evaluation participants and reviewed documents; a mapping of the Secretariat's portfolio for case selection; the primary case study summaries; and the semi-structured interview questionnaires.

## 2. Evaluation Methodology

### 2.1 Overall approach

The evaluation broadly took a PIALA-inspired approach. PIALA stands for 'participatory impact assessment and learning approach', a theory-based and participatory approach initially developed by the evaluators for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Gates Foundation to enable evidence-based learning around how multiple interventions and influences interact and combine to generate system change.<sup>2</sup> Rooted in the realist and transformative evaluation traditions, PIALA offers a model for designing evaluations that combine different methods with participatory processes to produce robust evidence of non-linear contribution to change and support learning and adaptive management. PIALA has been used for designing global portfolio and strategy evaluations such as this evaluation.

A gender and equity lens in an evaluation of a global strategy looks at gender integration in the strategy implementation and organisation (which is addressed in [Section 3.5](#)). The methodology itself aimed to include an equity perspective through its inclusive and participatory approach. PIALA normally also involves a multistage cluster sampling and carefully designed gender-specific and gender-mixed focus group discussions, using participatory statistics to assess the gender and equity aspects and enable gender-sensitive and equitable participation. However, this only applies to evaluations that assess distributed benefits and downstream impact on people's lives (not to a global strategy evaluation of upstream change in governance).

The design and process of this evaluation was intentionally utilisation focused: that is, carefully planned and conducted to optimise its learning value and likely uptake or utilisation across the organisation, taking into account the organisational readiness for change. The framing and focusing of its inquiries, the sampling of cases, and the selection of methods was developed in close consultation with the Secretariat's Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit, the Evaluation

Reference Group and senior management. The evaluation also adopted an iterative feedback process, with the intention of taking advantage of every emerging opportunity to turn extractive data collection into strategic reflection and learning moments. This implied, for instance, the engagement of both middle and senior management in the sensemaking of emerging evidence and findings prior to finalising the analysis and drafting the report. Lastly, the evaluation report has undergone four review rounds (three internal and one external), with documented responses provided by the evaluators to the feedback received in each round.<sup>3</sup>

Primary data were collected through online key informant interviews and focus group discussions with staff, partners and stakeholders in member country capitals, cross-checked through an extensive document review of all existing information and evidence (including from former and simultaneous evaluations).<sup>4</sup> The data collected and reviewed were mostly qualitative and perceptual, given the nature of the selected cases of the Secretariat's work – which largely centres on state governance and involves relatively small numbers of stakeholders, therefore not warranting quantitative measurements or quantification of qualitative data.<sup>5</sup>

The evidence and findings presented in this report have been thoroughly reviewed and cross-checked through multiple rounds of feedback to enhance their probative value and likely uptake. To ensure the findings were sufficiently robust, the Evaluation Team continued reviewing additional (external) evaluation sources and reports and conducting additional interviews to cross-check findings and address the feedback received from the sensemaking and the review of the first and second draft reports until the desired level of confidence was reached.

<sup>2</sup> See: Collaborative Impact, 'Designing and piloting of PIALA with IFAD', available at: <https://collabimpact.org/ifad>

<sup>3</sup> The internal rounds took place in September 2021, and in February and March 2022. An external round of feedback was provided by independent reviewers in November 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. documents and participants listed in Annex I.

<sup>5</sup> If sample populations are very small, then quantification (even of qualitative or perceptual data) becomes rather meaningless, irrespective of the nature of target groups, and thus useless for analysis.

As mentioned in the introduction (Section 1), this report concerns an evaluation of the Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21, which aims to contribute valuable insights into the development of the next Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 by taking an explicit forward-looking lens. This has been done by conducting a multi-case study of programmes or initiatives under the *current* strategy as potential 'signposts of the future' for the *next* strategy, and by creating and using an evaluative Theory of Change that takes the *next* strategy as a reference framework for assessing benefits and potential for change.

## 2.2 Evaluative Theory of Change

The Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21 was built to a significant extent as a continuation of the former Strategic Plan 2013/14–2016/17, but with more streamlined and reduced Strategic Outcome areas in response to the recommendations of an independent evaluation of the former Strategic Plan and a meta-analysis of past evaluation studies. Similarly, the next Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 intends to be more strategically streamlined and slightly more focused in its Strategic Outcomes than the current Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21. This allowed the evaluators to use the *next* Strategic Plan as the reference framework for creating an evaluative Theory of Change (ToC) to assess the benefits and contributions of *current* strategy

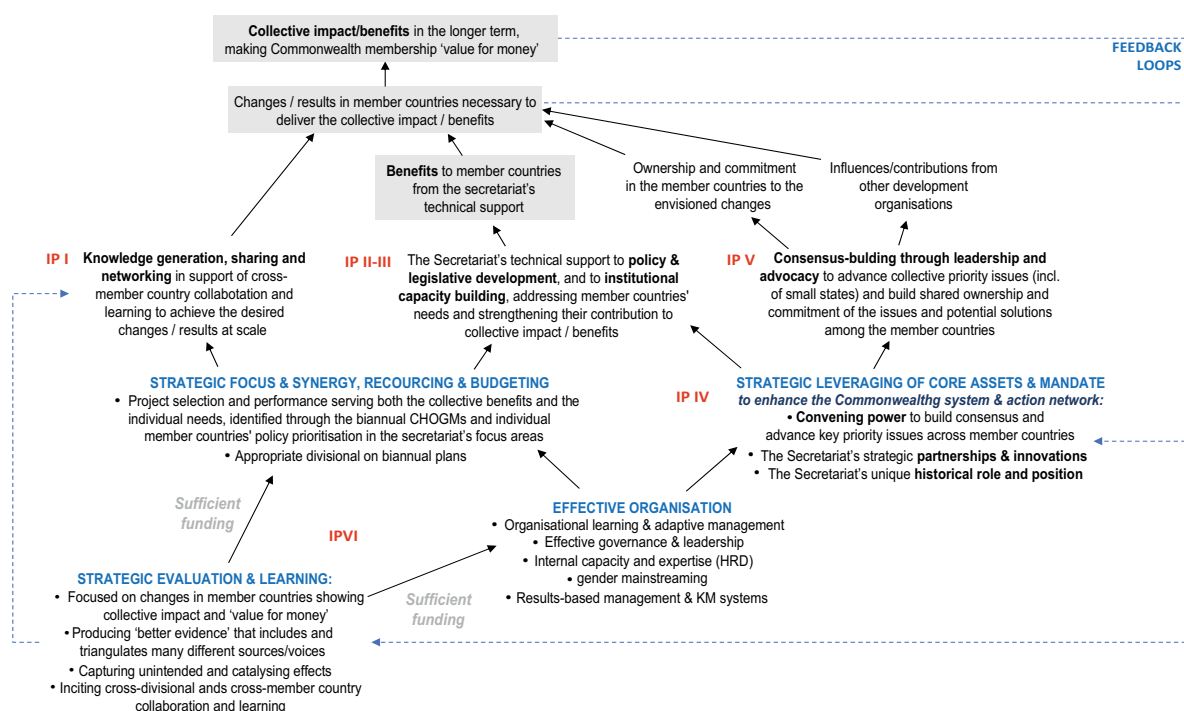
programmes and initiatives and to assess the coherence, context relevance and SDG alignment from the *previous* to *present* strategy periods (thus reframing the evaluation to take a forward-looking lens, while still meeting the objectives, as mentioned in Section 1).

Figure 2.1 exhibits the evaluative ToC. It shows how the five dimensions presented in Section 1 (namely, focus and synergy; resourcing and budgeting; leveraging of assets and mandate; evaluation and learning; and organisation) combine to enable the Secretariat to deliver the desired benefits and contributions to change in and across the Commonwealth member countries through the Impact Pathways (IPs) of its new strategy. Visualising the IPs in the evaluative ToC made it possible to also assess their value for evidence-based learning (which is one of the evaluation objectives also reflected in the evaluation questions under point 4 in Box 1.1 in the above Section 1).

Specifically, the ToC shows how the Secretariat seeks to deliver these benefits and contributions to change, and achieve its Strategic Outcomes, through its four *delivery* Impact Pathways:

- networking for knowledge sharing, standard setting and peer-to-peer learning and support between member countries (which in the new strategy corresponds with IP I);

Figure 2.1. Evaluative Theory of Change



- technical support to policy/legislative development (or IP II in the new strategy);
- technical support to institutional capacity building (IP III in the new strategy); and
- consensus building between member countries through leadership and advocacy (IP V in the new strategy).

These *delivery* IPs are backed by two organisational *enabling* IPs:

- leveraging of core assets and mandate in ways that help to enhance the Commonwealth system and action network to achieve bigger impact (which in the new strategy corresponds with IP IV);<sup>6</sup> and
- acceleration of action and delivery through better management for results and better evidence-based learning: more reflexive, risk-informed and agile (or IP VI in the new strategy).

The selected cases of current programmes and initiatives (presented in [Section 2.3](#)) were assessed alongside this evaluative ToC as potential 'signposts of the future', in terms of the ways they try to generate contributions towards achieving the Secretariat's Strategic Outcomes. With its mission being to work as a trusted partner to member country governments and the broader Commonwealth system to uphold democracy, diversity/equality and good governance for sustainable development, and to catalyse global consensus building, the Strategic Outcomes for 2021/22–2024/25 are:

- promoting adherence to the values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter in advancement of democracy and good governance (for example, through supporting credible, transparent and inclusive elections and political participation and building democratic institutions that adhere to the rule of law);
- promoting sustainable and inclusive economic and social development (for example, through supporting trade policy-making, competitiveness and connectivity, youth employment and entrepreneurship, blue ocean governance, sustainable debt

management, universal access to health and education);

- enhancing environmental and climate resilience (for example, through supporting inclusive adaptation and mitigation in response to the global climate and ocean emergencies); and
- ensuring the needs and concerns of small and other vulnerable states (SVS) are addressed in global governance and finance mechanisms (for example, through enhancing their voice and access to global climate change finance).

This clearly shows that the Secretariat's impact is at the level of state governance and institutions, thus *not directly* on the subnational systems that affect people's lives.

Two important contextual factors were considered by this evaluation that had a significant influence on the Secretariat's ability to deliver results during the Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21: one was the decline in discretionary funding from member countries; the other was the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2.3 Multi-case study methodology

To assess 'benefits', 'coherence' and 'relevance' from a forward-looking perspective and determine the value of the Secretariat's IPs for cross-organisational evidence-based learning, the evaluation conducted a multi-case study of initiatives that were considered as potential 'signposts of the future'. The cases were carefully selected in close consultation with the Secretariat's Senior Management, its Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit, and the internal Evaluation Reference Group, drawing on the following criteria:

- reflecting the Secretariat's niche/flagship areas and priorities for the future;
- reasonable coverage of CHOGM mandates, Impact Pathways and Strategic Outcomes in previous, current and next strategy periods;
- reasonable coverage of the different regions (Asia, the Pacific, Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe);
- providing opportunities to learn about highly challenging contexts versus contexts ready for change; and
- priority to cases that have not been evaluated recently.

<sup>6</sup> IP IV was introduced as an additional IP to the new Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25, which at the time of writing this report was yet to be approved.

**Table 2.1. Overview of selected cases**

| Strategic outcomes  | Primary cases                           | Case inquiries  |
|---|---|---|
| Advancing democracy and good governance                             | Elections (YPCWG1006)                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cameroon 'full cycle' electoral support</li> <li>• Solomon Islands 'full cycle' electoral support</li> <li>• Malawi 'full cycle' electoral and conflict prevention support</li> </ul>  |
| Enhancing environmental and climate resilience/SVS                  | Co-ordinated Climate Action (YBPAC1063) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-ordinated and accelerated climate action through a mutually reinforcing combination of external strategic partnership building backed by internal programmatic synergy</li> </ul>   |
| Promoting sustainable and inclusive economic and social development | Competitiveness (YXCWG1017)             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EAC (East African Community)-AEO (Authorised Economic Operator) Regional project</li> <li>• Belize Export Diversification project</li> <li>• Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) e-commerce readiness assessment project</li> <li>• Cameroon national training on investment treaties</li> </ul> |
| Promoting sustainable and inclusive economic and social development | Universal Health Coverage (YHCWG1044)   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support to the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) on non-communicable diseases (NCD) legislative reform</li> <li>• The Bahamas – Mental Health Legislation</li> <li>• Commonwealth Malaria</li> </ul>  |
| Promoting sustainable and inclusive economic and social development | Meridian Debt Management (YDCWG1039)    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meridian-based strategy development for sustainable debt management in The Gambia</li> <li>• Global partnership with the World Bank on sustainable debt management</li> </ul>  |
| Promoting sustainable and inclusive economic and social development | Connectivity (YXCWG1012)                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CCA (Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda) clusters: digital, physical, regulatory, supply side and business-to-business (B2B) connectivity</li> </ul>   |

An initial mapping of cases based on these criteria (presented in Annex II) was used to facilitate the engagement of the Evaluation Reference Group and Senior Management in the case selection. Its initial selection of seven primary and four secondary cases was narrowed down to a final sample of six primary programme case studies, each comprising three or four country or cluster initiatives (thus totalling around 20 cases). The final set of cases that came out of this process is presented in [Table 2.1](#).

As mentioned above, primary data for the case studies were collected via online key informant interviews and focus group discussions with staff, partners and stakeholders in member country

capitals, cross-checked through an extensive document review of all existing information and evidence (including from former and simultaneous evaluations).<sup>7</sup> Given the COVID-19 situation and travel restrictions, the evaluation was designed to be undertaken entirely remotely and virtually, using Microsoft Teams and Zoom for the online meetings, combined with Otter for the recording and transcription.

## 2.4 Challenges and limitations

The evaluation encountered multiple delays and challenges in reaching stakeholders due to several

<sup>7</sup> Cf. documents and participants listed in Annex I.

factors. One concerned the replacement of the Evaluation Team post-inception (first of the team lead and subsequently of the senior evaluator, both for health reasons), which created a substantial time lag between the strategic planning and the evaluation process, requiring an adaptation of approach and focus (see Section 1). Due to this delay, the evaluation started its data collection at the time when staff and management were occupied with the closing of the fiscal year and strategic planning.

In addition, two other major evaluations were conducted simultaneously (on small states and on consensus building), partly interviewing the same stakeholders and creating additional time pressure on staff and management. Meanwhile, new COVID-19 outbreaks made multiple countries go into another quasi lockdown, limiting stakeholders' ability to respond and engage. Many were also going on summer vacation around that time (July–August). As a result, the evaluation encountered significant difficulties in finding people who were reachable and available. This limited

the possibility to conduct deep-dive case studies, cross-check emerging findings and build more of a holistic picture.

A great deal of effort went into repeated outreach with mixed success, despite the support of the Secretariat's Strategy, Learning and Evaluation team and of the focal points for the selected case studies. Responsiveness from the capitals was a challenge throughout this evaluation, as well as for the other evaluations. COVID, summer vacations, limited connectivity, but also limited benefits for those interviewed, were among the factors that influenced people's appetite to engage in the evaluations. As a result, this evaluation only partially succeeded in snowballing more stakeholders to achieve greater depth and robustness to its findings.

To ensure the findings were sufficiently robust to draw conclusions with confidence, the Evaluation Team continued reviewing additional (external) evaluation sources and reports and conducting additional interviews to cross-check findings until the desired level of confidence was reached.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Strategic focus and synergy Benefits, synergies and impact

The Secretariat is an intergovernmental and multi-mandate organisation that operates across a large membership of 54 member countries and is guided by the Commonwealth Charter, the mandates it receives from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs) and its Strategic Plan. Its mission is to work as a trusted partner to the member country governments and the broader Commonwealth system in order to uphold democracy, diversity/equality and good governance for sustainable development and to catalyse global consensus building for advancing the shared interests of the Commonwealth's citizens and improving their well-being.<sup>8</sup> It works mostly with governments and behind the scenes, and its agenda reflects the collective wishes of its 54 member countries. What the Secretariat is expected to achieve with an average of £31.3 million per year is extremely ambitious.<sup>9</sup>

The incredible work done in the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21 by its 210–255 employees<sup>10</sup> in the 54 member countries in all its thematic areas spanning almost the entire sustainable development spectrum, deserves acknowledgement and admiration. With very few resources, the Secretariat has helped prevent conflict, change policies and laws, improve legal systems, and strengthen democratic institutions. It has supported member countries in their efforts to hold credible, transparent and inclusive elections, close the digital divide, and manage national debt. It has enhanced small and other vulnerable states' global voice and competitiveness, access to climate finance, and capacity to manage and regulate the use of their natural resources.

As confirmed by both internal and external stakeholders, and by the recent evaluation on consensus building,<sup>11</sup> the Secretariat strategically uses its convening power to create 'a table for difficult conversations' that paves the way to global consensus building and enables major global SDG-related breakthroughs, notably: in the development of the Call to Action on Land, the Blue Charter, the Climate Finance Access Hub and the 'Commonwealth says no more' one-stop shop on violence against women and girls (VAWG). It synergistically combines consensus building with tactical technical support to member countries and knowledge sharing and networking between member countries, in order to develop shared 'good governance' standards and progressively influence change in policy/legislation, institutions and systems in areas as wide as democracy and the rule of law, trade and competitiveness, youth and jobs, health and education, gender and social inclusion, climate resilience and the protection of oceans and land, and much more. To achieve all this, it works across the different levels of the Commonwealth system (CHOGM, intergovernmental ministerial meetings and action groups, national officials and institutions, and global, regional and national partners) to identify, promote and embed change, while injecting small-budget technical support for tools and platforms where there is an unmet need and an opportunity for scaling in/out.

Evidence mapping of programmatic, thematic and strategic evaluations completed between 2013/14 and 2019/20<sup>12</sup> suggests that the Secretariat's programmes are, in general, relevant and effective in delivering desired results and generating tangible benefits for the member countries. There is sufficient feedback from external stakeholders confirming that, indeed, the Secretariat has maintained a strong reputation as a global intergovernmental organisation, delivering relevant and effective programmes and projects. The Secretariat's approach to delivering technical support to member countries, building shared

8 See: Commonwealth Governance for Development, available at: <https://www.commonwealthgovernance.org/commonwealth-governance/commonwealth-secretariat/> and <https://thecommonwealth.org/about-us/secretariat>

9 This concerns the average annual budget during the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21 (data received directly from the Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit in SPPDD).

10 The Secretariat's HR headcount in the financial years of the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21 were as follows: 249 in 2017, 210 in 2018, 216 in 2019, 229 in 2020, and 255 in 2021 (data received directly from Human Resources [HR]).

11 See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), *Evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat Consensus Building Programme*, Cynosure/Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

12 See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), 'Evidence Mapping Notes', internal document.

knowledge and networks, and reaching consensus through leadership and advocacy is entirely demand driven. This enables it to be highly responsive and contributes to stronger member country ownership and relevance to national priorities and needs.

However, the evidence mapping of 2013/14–2019/20 evaluations reveals persistently weak evidence and weak results at the higher outcome and impact levels. Being entirely demand driven makes it very challenging for the Secretariat to manage member country expectations. Stakeholders interviewed in this strategy evaluation, as well as the evaluation on support to small states (also conducted in 2021, independently),<sup>13</sup> confirmed that the Secretariat's technical assistance raises member country expectations for results that often cannot be delivered with its ever-decreasing budgets. Echoing the second 2018 report of the High Level Group on Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat, this was also flagged as a major risk in the 2020 Mid-Term Review:<sup>14</sup>

*By attempting to respond to all member country demands for support, the Secretariat risks over-promising and under-delivering, and diluting the potential impact of its work. When the Secretariat is unable to respond to requests for support, or to demonstrate progress in member country priority areas, owing to lack of resources, there may be negative consequences. Member countries may question the Secretariat's contribution, along with the value of their own financial contribution to the organisation, and in turn the organisation's relevance.*

The 2020 Mid-Term Review suggested setting national and regional targets to attain greater focus, but there are simply not enough resources to create an observable downstream impact in every member country and in all areas across nearly the entire development spectrum. There is an ongoing tension between, on the one hand, the desire to deliver demand-driven and country-owned benefits meeting member countries' individual and immediate needs and, on the other hand, the

ambition to generate sustained change and bigger impact within and across member countries.

Case study findings from this strategy evaluation (of which summaries are attached in Annex III and a subset is presented in [Box 3.1](#)) show how staff attempt to address this tension and incubate change that potentially could lead to higher-level outcomes. The case studies provide valuable insights into the Secretariat's ways of working, of which a summary is provided in [Section 3.2](#).

### SDG and Charter alignment

The Commonwealth Charter (agreed in 2013/14 after more than two years of consensus building) formed the precursor of the UN's 2030 Agenda. Hence the values and principles promoted in these two documents are quite similar (universality, leaving no one behind, interconnectedness and indivisibility, inclusiveness, and partnerships). Commonwealth Heads of Government have declared their unwavering commitment to upholding the core values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>15</sup> The Secretariat's Strategic Plan operationalises these principles through its ways of working (for example, mainstreaming an inclusive and collaborative approach, working in partnership, and facilitating good practice and knowledge sharing). Furthermore, as a recent internal assessment of SDG-alignment<sup>16</sup> has shown, the Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21 impressively delivered against 13 of the 17 SDGs.

Member countries' national development plans (NDPs) are mostly administered by national finance and planning authorities, which creates further opportunities for the Secretariat to continue to align its work with the SDGs and use its convening power to build consensus around member countries' key priorities and needs. For instance, with the second five-year round of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) now starting, the Secretariat's Climate Change Unit will be in a position to help with agenda setting

13 See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), *Evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Support to Small States*, Draft Report, Triple Line/Commonwealth Secretariat, London, pp 41–42.

14 See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2020), *Mid-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2017/2018–2020/2021*, p xi.

15 See: 'Commonwealth Heads of Government online statement on the COVID-19 pandemic', available at: <https://production-new-commonwealth-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/migrated/inline/Commonwealth%20Statement%20on%20COVID-19%20FINAL%20VERSION.pdf>

16 See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), 'Evidence Mapping Notes', internal document.



and for co-ordinating synergised Rio Convention implementation under its new Call to Climate Action on Living Lands (CALL) initiative (see [Box 3.1](#)), with a particular focus on supporting advocacy by small and other vulnerable states (SVS) at key platforms, such as CHOGM and COP26.

Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be a major challenge in the coming period, requiring governments, businesses and civil society to work together across borders. This is a powerful driver to bring partners around the table (*'how do we dig ourselves out of this economic hole?'*). The impact of the pandemic on member countries varies, depending on their economic structure and specific vulnerabilities. Post-COVID-19 recovery and resilience strategies will require major investments. The UN has identified five priorities: protecting

health services and systems; social protection and basic services; protecting jobs and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); macroeconomic response and multilateral collaboration; and social cohesion and community resilience. The priorities of the Commonwealth Heads of Government largely overlap with those of the UN, with some additional or particular emphasis on the prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG), debt management and financial stability, digital trade, and the protection of small and other vulnerable states. For the latter, the Secretariat has identified three major priorities: strengthening of healthcare systems, bridging the digital divide and digitisation of trade.<sup>17</sup>

These priorities are already covered in most NDPs, but will gain greater attention and therefore offer

### Box 3.1. Case study selected summary findings on benefits, synergies and impact

#### Trade competitiveness

The Secretariat's Trade Competitiveness Section undertakes initiatives that support 'effective mechanisms for increased trade, increased access to trade, employment and business growth', in pursuit of sustainable and inclusive economic development. The initiatives generally combine policy frameworks/legislation and *ex-post* technical support.

#### Belize – export competitiveness

The Secretariat's involvement with improving Belize's export competitiveness, for instance, has been a long-term engagement. In this, it supported the Government of Belize on legislative reform to in order to progress its World Trade Organization (WTO) status, while also supporting its national export strategy process. Having observed an important implementation gap that hampered the achievement of sustained, change caused by an inadequate institutional infrastructure and capacity, the Secretariat followed up with *post hoc* technical support to the dedicated national export co-ordinating and monitoring agency, BELTRAIDE. Aimed at enhancing the country's export performance and reducing the cost of doing business, alongside improvements in revenue collection and financial sector reform, the Secretariat's support focused on institution strengthening and sustainability, drawing on a flexible and open working relationship through which the partners designed and delivered this package of technical support. Although it is too early to see longer-term impacts on Belize's export competitiveness, the Secretariat has clearly been successful in strengthening institutional readiness to support exporters. Key to the Secretariat's success was its institutional positionality, political credibility and role as a trusted adviser, working in partnership mode with no conditionalities attached.

#### Cameroon – international investment treaties

Another interesting initiative was the training of national stakeholders on international investment treaties, which was organised bilaterally with the Government of Cameroon. This was part of a

<sup>17</sup> International Trade Policy Unit, Trade Oceans and Natural Resources Directorate (2021), 'Impact and Recovery from COVID-19 for Commonwealth Small States', in *Small States Matters* No 1.

broader push to build regional member country capacity to develop foreign direct investment for sustainable development and protect themselves from expensive litigation from multinational companies. Through trust-based relationships developed with Cameroon's former Director of the Ministry of Mines, Industry and Technological Development, an agreement was reached around the delivery of a national training workshop. With limited in-house capacity, the Secretariat reached out to the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), a long-term partner with a strong track record in the field, to deliver the training. Crucially, the Secretariat's endorsement, backed by its reputation and trustworthiness, conferred political visibility and technical credibility to the process, as evidenced by high-level representation at the workshop from key ministries. This contrasted with other agencies that had in the past created tensions around the quality of their input. Comparing regional and national approaches, IISD's lead on sustainable investment reflected that while at a regional level with small funding you can reach multiple countries (especially if part of a regional integration organisation), drilling down to the national level remains critical to achieving impact.

### **Electoral support**

For more than 40 years, the Secretariat has been working on the 'core business' area of electoral support (mainly through observation missions and its Good Offices) to enable member countries to deliver more credible and inclusive elections. The Commonwealth's Electoral Support Programme, a 'brand strength', is integral to the Secretariat's work in advancing democracy in member countries. Since 2018, the programme has expanded to a 'full cycle' approach that also provides on-demand pre- and post-election technical assistance, peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing, conflict prevention and other support during elections, in addition to the observation missions and Good Offices. The Electoral Support Section (under the Governance and Peace Directorate [GPD]) has developed an explicit Theory of Change around 'full cycle' electoral support that assumes that electoral reform requires strong political and institutional commitment, created through consensus building in policy forums, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange (inter alia) in the Commonwealth Electoral Network (CEN), and the provision of tailored technical support on demand by the Secretariat as a trusted partner.

#### **Cameroon – electoral support**

In 2020–2021, the Secretariat provided training support to the national committee 'Elections Cameroon' (ELECAM) on the electoral system and legal framework, voter registration and gender mainstreaming. This was entirely demand driven and co-funded by the Government of Cameroon, showing real political will. The support involved a series of training workshops, including training of trainers (ToT) of senior officials and Senior Management, combining virtual and real time facilitation with support from a Canadian consultant, and training of regional staff provided offline by trained ELECAM officials. An important outcome of the training was a proposal for policy reform to enable electoral staff to better perform and to also enable transparent civil society and media engagement. Participation in the Commonwealth Electoral Network enabled ELECAM officials to learn from the experiences in other Commonwealth countries. ELECAM has focal points for participation in different networks, including the UN and Francophonie, but finds the CEN most useful for peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing. Key to the Secretariat's success was its institutional positionality and technical credibility, its flexibility to adapt the hybrid delivery model to the needs of the participants, and, above all, its longstanding trust-based relationship with the country. This relationship had been built up over the years through sustained engagement in accelerating democratic reforms, which also contributed to the establishment of ELECAM as the first independent election management body in the country. This demonstrates impact that goes far beyond the successful delivery of a national capacity building effort.

#### **Solomon Islands – electoral support**

Another example is the full cycle electoral support provided to Solomon Islands, which started in 2001 when the country was grappling with a period of civil unrest. The Solomon Islands Election

Commission (SIEC) has been consistently responsive to recommendations from observation missions. During the most recent election cycle (2014–2019), a process of electoral reform was initiated and a new Electoral Act was passed. In addition, the SIEC's statutory and regulatory framework was reviewed to enhance its capacity to fully exercise its oversight functions in accordance with international standards; penalties provided for under the National Parliament Electoral Provisions Act were enhanced to more effectively deter corrupt practices; procedures were established for pre-poll voting and voter registration; and training for journalists was provided to increase public confidence in the accuracy and integrity of the media's coverage of future elections. The electoral reforms helped to improve the conduct of the general election in April 2019. Several other engagements have grown out of the electoral support to Solomon Islands, including the SIEC's participation in the development of a *Commonwealth Good Practice Guide* on election cybersecurity, and its hosting of the Commonwealth Electoral Professionals (CEP) regional meeting. Senior officials of ELECAM (Cameroon) and SIEC (Solomon Islands) were unequivocally and extremely positive about the full cycle electoral support provided to them by the Secretariat. Central to this support is the Secretariat's technical expertise, political credibility and sustained engagement in accelerating electoral reforms.

### **Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda (CCA)**

The CCA supports member countries to develop the necessary intergovernmental architecture to build enabling trade and industry ecosystems. Its implicit Theory of Change draws on the assumption that member countries (in particular small and other vulnerable states) can be empowered to bridge the digital divide and to create the enabling regulatory and policy environment for sustainable digital trade, business and industry development by iteratively building consensus (through 'convening'), facilitating evidence-based collaborative action planning (through 'equipping'), and providing tailored technical support and strengthening the capacities of participating member countries (through 'advising'). The CCA takes a 'full member country feedback cycle' approach to address the challenge of making CHOGM and Apex consensus and decisions feed into programming with national decision-makers. Multistakeholder platforms are organised around five Connectivity Clusters (digital, physical, regulatory, supply side, business-to-business [B2B] connectivity) with participants engaging from across the Commonwealth, offering a space for real cross-stakeholder knowledge sharing, learning and dialogue. Smaller and less advanced member countries are enabled to engage through the sharing of knowledge and the awareness and capacity building element provided by the Secretariat's CCA team. The clusters are led by (mostly) senior trade officials, who brief their colleagues on the cluster work at the senior trade officials meetings (STOMs).

The Secretariat's convening role and technical know-how was highly valued among stakeholders, and the idea of working in clusters was found to be 'brilliant'. Stakeholders suggested revamping and accelerating the CCA cluster work. For example, they suggested: (1) to focus the cluster work on legal reform for digital trade to support post-COVID-19 economic recovery, which would serve as a pull for regulatory change and investments in digital infrastructure and supply chain linking; (2) to formalise the clusters' agendas, focused on achieving very practical and concrete outcomes, and linked to clear milestones for formal decision-making at Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meetings (CTMMs); (3) to encourage dialogue and collaboration between trade ministers and the business world by developing a comprehensive network database of business organisations and groups across the Commonwealth; (4) to facilitate a cross-geographic conversation and broker an intergovernmental response to the question of capacity building of member countries (in particular smaller and more vulnerable states) to grow their digital economies; and (5) to establish a core team of strategic partners who were willing to share the burden, drive the agenda together, and mobilise funding and support from member countries who wanted to see solutions.

### **Universal health coverage**

The Secretariat's Health and Education Unit seeks to advance the agenda of accelerating universal health coverage in the Commonwealth (ensuring that no one is left behind) through a three-

pronged strategy that encompasses policy and legislation advancement, toolkit development and implementation, and accelerating gains (for example, on malaria, cervical cancer and non-communicable diseases [NCDs]).

#### **Pacific Community (SPC) – NCD legislative reform**

The Secretariat's Health and Education Unit partnered with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and Commonwealth Pacific region member countries to support legislative reform on health provision for NCDs. The technical work of legislative drafting was embedded in a regional process of consultation and dissemination to ensure that the participants, having been sensitised on the regional legislative framework, returned to their respective countries seeing a clear pathway to national NCD legislative reforms. The Secretariat's institutional credibility and convening role among member countries was widely recognised and valued throughout the process. At the 7th Pacific Heads of Health Meeting held in Fiji in 2019, delegates recommended that progress on the legislative framework was reported at the Pacific Health Ministers Meeting 2019, completed and then put to health ministers for endorsement.

#### **The Bahamas – Mental Health Legislation**

The Secretariat's Health and Education Unit supported the Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation (CNMF) to develop new mental health legislation for The Bahamas. Through previous work, CNMF had developed and refined a model for achieving national mental health legislative reform. Recognising the quality and impact of this previous work, the Secretariat engaged with CNMF as a partner and funded the inputs of a global expert on mental health legislation, along with CNMF administrative time in a 50:50 timeshare. While the Secretariat's modest financial support was extremely valuable to pump-priming the project, its value-added was more notable in respect of the high-level endorsement that it brought to stakeholder engagement in policy processes. This was illustrated by the leverage extended with the Government of The Bahamas in partnership with CNMF to establish a national advisory committee to oversee the process from critique to drafting to consultation/revision and finally to parliament. Critically, this national process holds the promise of being scaled up across the region, recognising the common legal framework that exists across member countries. The Health and Education Unit (which is part of the Economic, Youth and Sustainable Development (EYSD) Directorate) is collaborating internally with the Rule of Law Section (in the Governance and Peace Directorate) and with the Sports Unit (which is part of the Economic, Youth and Sustainable Development (EYSD) Directorate) to look to scale this success story out to achieve what it describes as a '*multiplier effect with small resources*'.

#### **Climate Action on Living Lands (CALL)**

With the CALL initiative, the Secretariat aims to pursue a programme of scaled delivery of co-ordinated and accelerated climate action through a mutually reinforcing combination of external strategic partnership and consensus building, backed by internal programmatic synergy. This twin-track approach is in its early stages and highly ambitious but purposeful, with great promise of impact. Member countries broadly praised the Secretariat's convening power and its role as a facilitator and thought leader, but also flagged concerns over sustainability of implementation and resourcing, potential duplication with comparable global initiatives, and the need to strengthen conceptual clarity and focus. The rigour and detail of this feedback confirms both the credibility of the Secretariat in its leadership role and the complexity and importance of building consensus.

#### **External strategic partnership building**

The approach to building strategic partnerships is channelled through a set of organisational memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the three Rio Conventions on desertification (the UN Convention to Combat Desertification [UNCCD]), biodiversity (the Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD]) and climate change (the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC]) and with

regional organisations. Through these partnerships, the Secretariat supports member countries by co-ordinating in-country actions to implement commitments agreed under the three Rio Conventions. The Secretariat's Climate Change Section is currently advocating for this role through consultations on a draft Commonwealth Living Lands Charter, which is expected to be adopted at the next CHOGM and presented as: *'a commitment to work towards climate resilient and sustainable land management in member countries by integrating the targets of the three Rio Conventions thus catalysing progress in achieving the SDGs'*. The urgency of this Charter is framed by a restatement of the threat to vulnerable member countries posed by climate change. In developing the Charter and fleshing out its co-ordinating role, the Secretariat has invested considerable time in consulting member countries to build understanding, consensus and collective ownership in the run up to CHOGM and COP26 through a series of regional and bilateral consultations.

### **Internal cross-unit collaboration and programmatic synergy**

The CALL initiative seeks to build internal cross-programmatic synergy by strengthening the co-ordination and coherence of all Secretariat climate change-related platforms and initiatives. This means speaking to, but also going beyond, the Living Lands Charter in order to draw out and maximise the impact of all available resources. The synergy building extends to other programmes that cut across the landscape of supporting policies and strategies. In particular, there is a strategic push within the Climate Change Section to integrate and mainstream gender and youth considerations, to work closely with the Blue Charter initiative, and to engage with both the EYSD's Universal Vulnerability Index and the Disaster Risk Portal for vulnerable states.

### **Commonwealth Meridian – Debt Management System**

The Secretariat supports member countries to effectively manage their debt portfolios by building capacities, providing technical assistance in developing modernised legal and regulatory frameworks for debt management, and facilitating the use of its Commonwealth debt management software system. Public debt management has undergone significant transformation in recent years, with stronger emphasis being placed by international investors and funders on transparency and strategy development for improved debt and risk management. Hence the Secretariat's Debt Management Unit awarded an India-based company the contract to develop Commonwealth Meridian, the new Commonwealth Secretariat debt management system (launched in 2019) that addresses these emerging requirements, drawing on state-of-the-art technologies.

Commonwealth Meridian is a comprehensive and customisable solution for integrated and proactive public debt management in centralised, decentralised and hybrid IT and institutional environments. It allows for comprehensive debt management strategy development, drawing on both public and private debt recording, management and analysis, and caters for recording of public and publicly guaranteed debt, grants and lending portfolios (functions that did not exist in the Secretariat's older CS-DRMS system). The Secretariat helps users to migrate to Commonwealth Meridian and customise its functions to the country's institutional infrastructure, debt management processes and user needs. In collaboration with trusted high-capacity partners (such as the Institute of Eastern and Southern Africa [MEFMI]) it provides interactive training at scale and *post hoc* in-country follow-up and support to cement the benefits and achieve sustained change. Emerging issues and gaps are systematically being identified and addressed in close collaboration with users.

All stakeholders confirmed the enormous value and robustness of the system and of the technical training and support provided to them. Concrete benefits mentioned included the ability to plan, project and access finance for investments contributing to the sustainable development of the country, and the ability to successfully apply for debt relief (for example, the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative during COVID-19). Hence the Debt Management Unit is exploring options to build cross-unit synergies in the new Strategic Plan with the Climate Change Unit and the Oceans and Natural Resources Unit, to better support member countries who are increasingly embarking on innovative financing financial arrangements. System and capacity development for integrated debt

management and strategy development was viewed as being essential for a country's achievement of the SDGs (in particular, for the eradication of poverty, the provision of public health services, quality education, water and sanitation, the sustainable use of energy and natural resources, and the sustainable development of industries and infrastructures). All stakeholders argued quite convincingly that this was a niche area of work for the Secretariat that could not be done by others. Debt management is a highly specialised technical area, which requires technical expertise combined with knowledge of the countries' systems and institutions, built on deep relationships of trust.

great opportunities for the Secretariat to leverage its partnerships for impact. A mapping of the SDG-related COVID-19 recovery priorities in NDPs may help the Secretariat determine common targets.

### Unique value proposition (UVP)

As mentioned earlier, there is an ongoing tension between the desire to deliver country-relevant benefits to member countries and the ambition to generate sustained change and cross-geographic outcomes. The Secretariat was able to manage this tension and achieve impressive results in the period 2017/18–2020/21, by drawing on the almost inexhaustible commitment and creativity of its staff and managers, as well as its partners and the inspiring and vigorous leadership of the Secretary-General.

However, from the case study inquiries and the interviews with senior leadership and management in this evaluation, it appears a clear and shared understanding as to how to reconcile growing member country demands with declining discretionary funds is still largely missing. This makes it difficult for the Secretariat to continue achieving these impressive results and start demonstrating progress at the higher-outcome and impact levels.

There is an assumption that being a member-based organisation (different from organisations like the UN or the World Bank) implies there has to be a benefit for each of the 54 member countries (*'otherwise they would not wish to be members'*), and that a narrowing of thematic assistance would reduce *'the unique offer to the member states'*. As an intergovernmental organisation with a diverse makeup of 54 member country governments, which includes small countries, least developed countries (LDCs), small island states and G7/G5 (Group of 7, Group of 5) countries, the Secretariat has an 'inherently complex' task. This is not least in balancing the multiple CHOGM mandates and member country government demands on a tiny

budget; maintaining the flexibility/agility to act and tactically work in 'the gap' when the opportunity arise; and also maintaining the ability to provide a highly appreciated rapid response function (for example, following recent oil spills off Mauritius and the Sri Lanka), while keeping its longer-term strategic work 'on the rails'.

Hence the assumption may hold true and be important in a context of growing vulnerabilities and emergencies and declining multilateralism. But without greater focus and, above all, without a shared vision and understanding of such focus, over time it will become untenable. This was also one of the concerns raised in the second report of the High Level Group on the Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat:<sup>18</sup>

*Meanwhile, the Secretariat is faced with declining financial resources from its core funding sources (...) as a vehicle for funding myriad special priority projects is increasing. This is deeply symptomatic of an increasing competition between and among Commonwealth members over preferences for quite different and varied causes to be taken up. Not surprisingly, the Secretariat is faced with growing tensions with its governing bodies over the allocation and governance of resources, and*

18 High Level Group on the Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat (2018), Second Report, December, p 25.

Note: the High Level Group was mandated by the CHOGMs in 2015 and 2018 to conduct an independent review of the full governance arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat, to ensure streamlined and integrated governance for improved oversight, efficiency and transparency.

Its first report (September 2018) assessed the aspects of governance related to accountability and transparency, roles and responsibilities of the Secretariat's governing bodies, the appointment of Secretaries-General, and the practicality and stability of the Secretariat's various funds. Its second report (December 2018) looked at the Secretariat's collaboration with accredited Commonwealth organisations and other partners, and its mechanisms for addressing issues of global significance that impact the Commonwealth.

*one manifestation of this is a Commonwealth Secretariat trying to be everything to everyone, and on almost every issue. This way of doing things is unsustainable and has led to some members expressing deep concerns over the Commonwealth's focus being too diluted.*

The Secretariat will increasingly face difficulty in responding to member countries' needs (particularly those of small and other vulnerable states), as these will further increase and funds and resources will continue to decline. Managing member expectations and demonstrating added value will become increasingly difficult as funding declines. Attempts to streamline and narrow down its Strategic Outcome areas over the past two Strategic Plans (see [Section 2.2](#)) has not helped to attain greater focus. The areas remain broad enough to allow the Secretariat to continue its business as usual, responding to member countries' growing needs and demands within these areas. The above-mentioned evidence mapping<sup>19</sup> recommended the Secretariat to limit its roles to being a 'catalyser', 'broker' and 'capacity builder' (not an 'implementer' or 'funder'). But without a clear and shared vision of the Secretariat's comparative advantage in the global system, this is unlikely to bring greater focus.<sup>20</sup>

Internal and external stakeholder responses to the question how and where the Secretariat could generate unique value for the Commonwealth in the context of the current global system varied widely and covered almost the entire development spectrum (from knowledge to policy to on-the-ground delivery of concrete benefits in nearly all sectors). While this is too broad, they also identified important elements of the Commonwealth's history, identity and competencies, presenting the key ingredients for the Secretariat to identify its unique capabilities and niches, how and where it can move the needle in ways that other

intergovernmental organisations cannot do (see [Box 3.2](#) and [Box 3.3](#)). Bringing these together in a clear and unified vision of the Secretariat's UVP would greatly help to determine its focus and build internal and external alignment around how to reconcile the mismatch between expectations and resources, individual and collective needs, and short- and long-term outcomes.

Taking into account the global emergencies and SDG-related priorities, this would make it possible for the Secretariat to identify the two or three big investment topics where it most urgently and most capably could and should make a significant difference in the coming years. Digital trade might be one of these 'big-ticket' items (see also [Box 3.2](#)).<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

What the Secretariat aims to achieve with an average of £31.3 million per year is extremely ambitious and its incredible work deserves acknowledgement. This evaluation found that, through the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21, the Secretariat worked effectively to incubate change with limited resources, creating tangible benefits for member countries, while also expanding the potential for achieving impact through scaling in or out to other countries in the region or across the entire Commonwealth. Its work delivers against 13 of the 17 SDGs and operationalises and exemplifies the values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter and the 2030 Agenda in its ways of working. Throughout the strategy period, the Secretariat maintained a strong reputation as a global intergovernmental organisation.

However, the evaluation also found that the Secretariat fell short in demonstrating results at the outcome and impact levels. By being entirely demand driven, the Secretariat is spreading itself too thin in an already-overcrowded intergovernmental development space and running the risk of losing its comparative advantage. Its attempts to streamline and narrow down its Strategic Outcome areas over the past two Strategic Plans have not helped

19 See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), 'Evidence Mapping Notes', internal document.

20 For example, the Commonwealth Foundation's recent 'strategy reset' reoriented its entire portfolio to sharply focus on its core strength: nurturing civil society to constructively engage in governance in pursuit of the Commonwealth Charter values and principles. This helps management, staff and partners gain clarity around what is (and what is not) the Foundation's role. It does not see itself to be well-placed to lead on policy development, even if it concerns civil society, or on poverty alleviation, even if it involves civil society. Where there is a need, it will reach out to partners (for example, the Secretariat) who are better equipped to do this.

21 Note: this is not meant to be a judgement about one programme or topic being more relevant than others. This is just an example of a key topic on which the Secretariat could move the needle, given the global pandemic and the Secretariat's unique assets and strengths. Digital justice, digital governance and digital health have also been suggested by Senior Management.

### Box 3.2. External viewpoint on Commonwealth Secretariat's UVP

*I'm a great fan of the Commonwealth. But it can be a difficult animal to understand for those who are not members. Organisations that are not connected to the Commonwealth often don't understand the opportunity it presents at a global level. Business organisations for instance don't necessarily see its UVP, which is a shame. In my view, the Commonwealth has an amazing UVP that other international networks or IGOs [intergovernmental organisations] don't have. It's an amazing cross-cutting network of diverse geographies and diverse economies [from some of the largest economies to the smallest island states]. It is a microcosm of the WTO or the United Nations. So, if you can get traction in policy in the Commonwealth, then you're almost guaranteed to get traction in the bigger, more complex global community. There are also aspects of the Commonwealth that give it a huge advantage in the current climate – a shared legal system being top of the list. Few networks have the ability to harmonise frameworks like the Commonwealth.*

*The challenge is diversity with so many different needs across so many different economies, but if the Secretariat can establish a real focus where it has an advantage, then the opportunity to drive trade, growth and economic recovery is vast. Because in today's world, trade is largely done through regional networks (whether it's European, or whether it's the AFCFTA [African Continental Free Trade Area] in Africa, or ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations], or the Caribbean), on the ground, it can be difficult to see how/where the Secretariat adds value to where national governments are really focused. It's the cross-cutting nature of Commonwealth geography that gives it such an advantage, forcing policy-makers to think beyond their immediate geography and how frameworks align. This is critical for global value chains, which operate across all geographies and thrive on simplicity and alignment of rules.*

*Digital trade, for instance, is 'low-hanging fruit', where the Secretariat can make a real difference where other networks will be more challenged. It doesn't matter what anyone's views are on digital trade: this is the future and it's happening. The critical barrier to future (digital) trade growth is too many different legal frameworks that don't talk to each other. This forces businesses to operate on antiquated and inefficient systems, with a typical trade transaction taking up to 2–3 months and involving up to 27 paper-based documents. This system hasn't changed much for centuries, so there is a golden opportunity to sweep away the inefficiencies and capitalise on the gains for any grouping of economies that can harmonise legal frameworks and remove barriers to innovation and sustainable growth. A modern, connected digital ecosystem, where systems and stakeholders (including businesses and governments) talk to each other and where data and information can flow (for example, for electronic transfer records), is the future.*

*Legal reform and standardisation of the trading system are the two enabling building blocks of future [digital] trade. The WTO is the obvious place for coming together as a global community. But in a global community of 200 countries, it's incredibly difficult to reach consensus. So, the WTO has great difficulties trying to build consensus and reach agreements. The Commonwealth is a microcosm of that world. It's 54 countries, not 200 countries, all with shared legal heritage. And it has this amazing history around partnership, collaboration and sharing best practice, a common legal foundation, and a place for real dialogue between small and bigger states and between South-North-East-West.*

*The Commonwealth is better placed in that space, because it has more ability to reach consensus to resolve this tension than any other trade network (since all the others are primarily regional, thus not happening across geographies, or global, without national connection). This is where the Secretariat can facilitate a cross-geography conversation that would come forward with solutions to the problems that both India and South Africa (and also Uganda and others) quite rightly put on the table: 'how are we building capacity on the ground that will enable us to grow our digital economies?' The Commonwealth would act as a broker: if it could resolve this problem and build a consensus between the likes of the UK and Canada and Australia, and India and South Africa, around how we deal with cross-border digital trade, then this would be a total game changer in global trade. If we can get momentum on legal reform across the Commonwealth, not only will it deliver post-COVID-19 recovery and growth for Commonwealth countries, but it will also have a transformative effect across all other regions because of its connected geography.*



*and it will set a benchmark for others to follow. The Commonwealth has the infrastructure to make this happen faster than any other network. There is a massive opportunity for the Commonwealth to really shine and show the world what it is and what it can do. It's not political either, provided the case can be made clearly. There would be no one in the WTO community who would say that's a bad idea. This is the real UVP of the Commonwealth.*

**Source:** Stakeholder interview with UK Secretary-General, International Chamber of Commerce [ICC] United Kingdom.

to attain greater focus: member countries' demands and needs continue growing and funds continue shrinking within these areas. This signals the need to define and achieve greater focus and build internal and external alignment in a radically different way, based on a clear and unified vision of the Secretariat's UVP. What is needed, more than ever, is a unified vision among the Commonwealth leadership (including, the Secretariat's Senior Management and Commonwealth Heads of Government) on how to unleash the potential power of the Commonwealth's unique and historical identity and role as a 'force for good' in the world.

The High Level Group on Governance identified in its second report in December 2018 as a major challenge (both immediate and long term) for the Secretariat:<sup>22</sup> *'to effectively assist Commonwealth Heads of Government (at CHOGM) with prioritising a limited number of key global issues of concern to Commonwealth countries (both current and emerging), while strengthening its ability to add value and influence developments in such areas'*. This implies focus and strategy, and thus making hard choices regarding both its roles and its topics.

In terms of roles, the question is whether the Secretariat's biggest comparative advantage is upstream (for example, cross-geographic policy solutions) or downstream (implementation and impact on citizens). Thematically, it's about selecting the few big-ticket items where most urgently a significant difference and thus major investment should be made, and where the Secretariat has unique expertise/capabilities to significantly move the needle and add the biggest value.

## 3.2 Strategic leveraging of core assets and mandate

### The Secretariat as incubator of change

As mentioned above (in [Section 3.1](#)), this evaluation found that the Secretariat synergistically combines its convening power to build global consensus around 'difficult conversations', with tactical technical support to member countries and knowledge sharing and networking between member countries in order to develop shared 'good governance' standards and progressively influence change in policy/legislation, institutions and systems. To achieve this, it works across the different levels of the Commonwealth system and injects technical support for tools and platforms where there is an unmet need and an opportunity for scaling out/in.

The case study findings from this strategy evaluation (see [Box 3.1](#) in [Section 3.1](#) and Annex III) demonstrated the Secretariat's ability to incubate change through leveraging its historical role and position, its convening power, its technical know-how in key niche areas, its trust-based partnerships, and its core mandate to work *alongside* member country Heads and governments to advance democracy, equality/diversity and good governance in accordance with the Commonwealth Charter. It does this with virtually no resources, mostly drawing on data, expertise, models and lessons pooled from member countries:

*Small states cannot afford Bloomberg, so we're not paying but getting the data and the models for free: we're sharing and collating among member states, all based on trust. We are trusted because we have no 'skin in the game': we don't say to member states whether to go left or right, and don't come with pre-packaged answers; we listen and find the beat to which everyone can walk and share, and let them learn from each other how to compete against the problem by outperforming each other in sharing failures as much as successes.*

Source: Quote from leadership Interview

<sup>22</sup> High Level Group on the Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat (2018), Second Report, December, p 6.

Consensus building through leadership and advocacy has been an integral part of the Secretariat's historical role. In the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21, the Secretariat adopted a more multidimensional approach to consensus building, seeking to reach common understanding and positions, not only *politically* for global advocacy, but also *technically* for co-creating shared solutions.<sup>23</sup>

A number of tactical 'ways of working' and elements of good practice appeared from the case study findings:

- The Secretariat emerges as a trusted partner to member countries in its approach to technical support, modest in size but filling key 'niche' gaps, backed by its long-standing reputation and widely valued for its credibility and trustworthiness.
- The Secretariat generally proves to be a light, agile and responsive actor in response to singular requests for technical support. In most instances, support was fast-tracked, avoiding the high bureaucratic transaction costs associated with bigger IGOs. In the best project cases, the Secretariat proved to be sufficiently agile and tactically capable of adapting and even expanding its support to member country partners, both in scope and scale and in real time.
- The Secretariat utilises its historical inter-governmental role and position to work through, and add value to, the relationships between national, regional and cross-geographic entry points and build strategic partnerships. The case studies provide compelling evidence of 'scaling out' from national success across countries, as well as 'scaling in' from regional and cross-geographic initiatives into national policy and legislative change.
- The Secretariat also experiments with a 'full member country engagement feedback cycle' approach, which seeks to address the challenge of getting CHOGM and Apex governance consensus and decisions feeding into programming with national decision-makers through multistakeholder platforms

that bring together policy-makers, private sector actors and decision-makers of the different policy units or sectors involved (see, for example, the CCA approach).

- The Secretariat works consistently with a highly consultative and collaborative relationship-based approach, building and sustaining relationships with partners.
- The Secretariat repeatedly proved its worth as a highly credible and respected policy convenor and channel for advocacy partners, channelling evidence and providing platforms for messaging and discussion among member countries as advocates for policy change.
- The Secretariat builds internal synergies by working across units to sequence steps, maximise impact and create a multiplier effect with small resources.

Additionally, the case studies of this strategy evaluation identified some significant ongoing challenges facing the Secretariat when trying to translate its ways of working into sustained and scalable outcomes and cross-geographic impact. Brought sharply into focus through the case study review (as alluded to in [Section 3.1](#)), these challenges tend to inhibit or even undermine the leveraging of its core assets and mandate. Largely confirmed by other recent evaluations (for example, on small states and on consensus building), they include, notably:

- the frustrations of working with limited and short-term budget envelopes, while trying to engage in the long-term processes of institutional, organisational and policy change;
- the negative or undermining implications of these budget constraints on unit attempts to build long-term, trust-based relationships with regional and national partners, based on predictable timelines and inputs;
- linked to the above, the risk of dilution that a multi-front, multisector, demand-response approach to project engagement brings, undermining unit attempts to sustain and scale their contributions to change;
- the underlying credibility challenge faced by units experiencing a human resource budget squeeze: how to balance in-house expertise with externally contracted technical support, without damaging their core assets

<sup>23</sup> See also: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), *Evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat Consensus Building Programme*, Draft Report, Cynosure/Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

and credibility as having 'substance' with external partners;

- that the heavy reliance on long-term personal relationships, so valuable to the Secretariat's ways of working, can also undermine the sustainability of the partnerships if and when personal relations end; and
- the challenges raised by having to work virtually in its partnership, convening and technical support roles during the COVID-19 pandemic (elaborated below).

### COVID-19 incited changes in ways of working

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital transformation, which is now the biggest driver of innovation to make online work and investment more effective in the new world. Digitalisation at the Secretariat had already taken place to a certain degree during the 2016 reform towards results-based programming and enhanced risk management, for which new digital technologies were introduced and a hybrid cloud and server-based environment were created. Videoconferencing, e-meeting and learning facilities, and digital working platforms and systems were put in place, while remote working had become a normal practice by the end of 2019, well before the pandemic struck.<sup>24</sup> But the pandemic also made it necessary for the Secretariat to adapt and digitalise its ways of working with its partners, delivering its work by developing new approaches and new tools. In the training and technical support for Commonwealth Meridian, for instance, new methods and tools were developed that worked better online through screen sharing. The country teams had to prepare the setup themselves before each training, while e-learning courses and training of trainers were developed that enabled delivery at scale.

As bulleted above, the case study research conducted for this evaluation revealed that the Secretariat's approach to provide technical support to member countries tends to be more flexible and tactical than that of comparable agencies, as well as being more (personal) relationship-based than transactional. In marked contrast to comparable agencies that deliver rigid projects while 'trying

to control the meetings', there is always room for a non-technical dialogue and exchange of ideas. Significantly, due to this trust-based relationship-building approach, Secretariat units found it relatively easy to switch their mode of delivery from face-to-face to virtual during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 lockdowns, however, did present some challenges to the delivery of the Secretariat's ambition and strategic outcomes. For instance, in some of the cases reviewed by this evaluation, consensus building and strategic decisions were delayed and lost some momentum when CHOGM and several ministerial meetings were postponed due to the travel restrictions. The case study investigations for this evaluation revealed potential implications, for instance, in the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda and the work on Climate Action on Living Lands, which draw on the Secretariat's new multidimensional approach to consensus building. As mentioned by the *Consensus Building Programme Evaluation*:<sup>25</sup>

*Holding virtual meetings has revealed that while this modality puts less pressure on budgets, and also ensures the participation of many stakeholders who would not have otherwise been able to attend physical events, it was also observed to have significant drawbacks. In particular, digital connectivity and literacy in most member states, especially small states, can hamper meeting attendance and participation. Moreover, building consensus at the ministerial level requires extensive dialogue and face-to-face diplomacy, both of which are absent in online modality, where events otherwise scheduled for an entire day have to be squeezed into one-to-two hours.*

Meanwhile, the Secretariat's programmatic work with member country government officials and partners was often interrupted and delayed, with people being out of office for long periods of time and working from home in often remote areas with limited connectivity. The cluster meetings the CCA organised online were found to be much less effective at drawing out concrete action points from the consensus reached around priorities, leading to suboptimal results and making the cluster leads feel ill-prepared to be able to link one cluster meeting to the next. Providing training and technical assistance in virtual mode also posed important

<sup>24</sup> See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), 'COVID-19 Response Strategy and Action', internal document, p 6.

<sup>25</sup> See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), *Evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat Consensus Building Programme*, Draft Report, p 29.

challenges related to quality and outcomes. For instance, Commonwealth Meridian training and data migration were found to be far less effective and efficient, due to connectivity issues and less hands-on follow-up, leading to problems with data quality and less collaborative ways of working causing distraction and delay.

The 17 high-level ministerial meetings and more than 7,000 virtual meetings held between March 2020 and May 2021, on the other hand, demonstrate how the Secretariat was able to swiftly adapt to the COVID situation and make its ways of working even more inclusive. The ICT and Events and Protocol teams invested immense effort in making online events as accessible and inclusive as possible, learning from the experiences of the G20 meetings. A good example is how the new website was designed, consulting and engaging more than 400 stakeholders in various ways (for example, by using phones and innovative ways of presenting data) to enhance its accessibility and inclusiveness.

### Partnerships and innovation

As mentioned above, the case study research revealed that the Secretariat's approach to support member countries combines partnership with project-level technical support in tactical ways. The focus is on building trust-based relationships with beneficiary states and regional institutions, built up over many years of personal contact. The case study summaries attached in Annex III provide ample evidence of the success of these member country-level and regional partnerships.

However, strategic partnerships beyond tactical beneficiary relationships present a core asset that requires continual strengthening to foster (both internal and external) innovation and expand the Secretariat's influence and contribution (see [Box 3.2](#)). For this purpose, the Secretariat established in 2018 the Innovations and Partnerships Unit.

The Secretariat has built an impressive range of MoU-based strategic partnerships with joint action plans in recent years, drawing on its strong reputation as a global intergovernmental organisation. This was confirmed by multiple stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation: the Secretariat now has MoUs with some 42 partners, which are action- and outcome-oriented and linked to the SDGs. Reportedly, for multilateral agencies such as the Public

Investment Fund (PIF), Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Southern African Development Community (SADAC),<sup>26</sup> UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)<sup>27</sup> and others, the Secretariat has become 'a partner of choice'.<sup>28</sup> Moreover the Secretariat also maintains constructive relationships with the more than 82 (intergovernmental, professional and civil society) member organisations in the Commonwealth network.<sup>29</sup> The expectation is that these partnerships will contribute to innovation and bigger impact (and will thus be 'transformational'). However, the effectiveness of all these partnerships is yet to be seen.

Internal feedback on the partnerships and innovation initiative so far varies. While acknowledging the strategic importance of the MoUs and the value of sharing Commonwealth partner information, tools and knowledge products more widely on the 'Commonwealth Innovation' platform,<sup>30</sup> many programme staff have not yet experienced immediate benefits or support to their programmes. Strategic partnerships, it seems, have not yet been effectively operationalised and adopted by the programme teams as a core asset and cross-cutting organisational enabler of impact delivery.

The evaluation of partnerships and resource mobilisation conducted in 2020<sup>31</sup> flagged an important disconnect with the rest of the organisation and, more specifically, pointed to the inadequate organisational culture, structure and resourcing for leveraging this core asset. It concludes:<sup>32</sup> *'As partnership is not part of the DNA of the organisation, partnerships are seen internally and by external partners as bureaucratic, held centrally and ultimately ineffective.'*

Pressured to devote their limited resources on responding to member countries' increasing demands and delivering short-term project results and products, staff and management appear

26 Public Investment Fund, available at: <https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/pages/homepage.aspx>; Caribbean Community, available at: <https://caricom.org/>; Southern African Development Community, available at: <https://www.sadc.int/>

27 See: <https://unctad.org/>

28 Quoted from the interview with the Secretary-General.

29 See: <https://www.thecommonwealth.io/organisations/>

30 See: <https://www.thecommonwealth.io/>

31 Commonwealth Secretariat Partnerships and Resource Mobilisation Consultancy Report, December 2020

32 Quoted from the interview with the Secretary-General, p 3.

to have limited time for thinking about strategic partnerships as an investment:

*We spend a lot of time responding and putting out fires rather than thinking strategically about how we can engage the members in a more efficient and intentional way, and how we can better leverage our assets across multiple members to help them help each other. We are a small agency and intuitively we know our value-add, but we need to be more aware of it to draw our lines. We don't need to respond to everything.*

*The pressure is always to deliver easy results, right now, for this financial year. And so, if you have to show results in the short term, your resources get allocated mostly to those areas where you shine in the short term. But developing partnerships is a long-term game.*

Source: Quotes from Senior Management interviews

Expanding on its Commonwealth innovation initiative, the Innovations and Partnerships Unit could play an important role in helping the Secretariat to manage member country expectations and divert the centrifugal pressure placed on its programme teams by brokering partnerships that can provide technical assistance in those areas that are outside the scope of the Secretariat's prioritised big-ticket topics. Taking a leading role in this would help the Secretariat to remain focused, while also supporting member countries to get their priorities and needs addressed by others. Additionally, the unit could also play a crucial role in identifying and developing the key strategic partnerships that are essential for delivering on the prioritised big-ticket ambitions of the next Strategic Plan. Moreover, there seems to be a unique role in brokering relationships with non-traditional partners for member countries (such as, civil society and the private sector) within these key investment areas. For instance, related to post-COVID-19 recovery:

*Governance cannot advance sustainable social development and democracy without hearing the voice of its citizens. Collaboration with the Commonwealth Foundation, for instance, to build partnerships and networks with civil society and create space for their engagement in the decision-making regarding the recovery, in particular in small and vulnerable states, therefore, will be imperative.*

Source: Secretariat senior leadership

*The Secretariat's relationship and partnership approach is a real asset that it needs to capitalise on. Its Commonwealth trade strategy is really good: it has clear focus and is evidence led, and its economic studies are brilliant, which gives the Secretariat more credibility and influence. But it now needs to build up its relationships with businesses across the Commonwealth and make sure that their voices are heard by their trade ministers. This is the constant challenge of any global trade policy work: to move beyond just talk at the global level and make sure it happens at the national level. You can see this at the WTO, the UN and the OECD: everyone has the same problem. This is where the Secretariat can and should mark its difference. A comprehensive database of business organisations and business groups across the Commonwealth would be a useful tool for business outreach, for example, by the national chambers of commerce of the 54 members and by the Secretariat to make recommendations that go into, for instance, the CHOGM and CTMM. This would form the basis for developing a culture of business-to-business collaboration across the Commonwealth, which doesn't exist at this point. If we have strong connections to all the business associations within the national capitals, then that would enable us to [engage] (...) the entire Commonwealth business and finance world.*

Source: Global Commonwealth private sector partner

And finally, the Innovations and Partnerships Unit could also play an important role in building 'strategic partnership' competency across the organisation, embedded in an organisational learning agenda around leveraging core assets, and constructing a baseline for the prioritised big-ticket topics (for example, drawing on Commonwealth big data) as the basis for identifying hot spots for impact-focused 'gap filling'.

## Conclusion

This evaluation has explored and confirmed through its case study review how the Secretariat is able to incubate change by leveraging its core assets and mandate through various tactical 'ways of working'. These concerned, for instance: building trust-based relationships and 'niche' know-how for technical 'gap filling' in member countries; using convening power and drawing on technical credibility for multidimensional consensus

building (for example, through 'full cycle' member country feedback and multistakeholder dialogue); and combining historical and political capital with strategic partnership for cross-geographic scaling in/out of innovation and policy influence across multiple levels of governance. These 'ways of working' present elements of good practice that are worth exploring and modelling further in the next Strategic Plan as the basis for developing an organisational Theory of Change and impact learning agenda (as further discussed in point 4 in [Box 1.1](#) in Section 1).

Although the Secretariat was able to digitally adapt and respond with agility to member countries' shifting needs and demands under COVID-19 constraints, the effectiveness of its ways of working was seriously hampered by the pandemic. In the cases investigated by this evaluation, its technical support suffered from the connectivity problems and workflow interruptions in the countries. Also, its convening and momentum towards consensus were to some extent and on some occasions impacted due to the postponement of meetings and limitations of online participation. Like many other multilateral organisations, the Secretariat will draw positive lessons from its experiences in the next Strategic Plan to further improve and better

adapt its ways of working (for example, in terms of how to adapt cross-purpose, cross-level and cross-stakeholder 'convening' for consensus building to the needs of a digitalising Commonwealth; and how to use online sharing of data, knowledge and tools and real-time partner mapping as a means to innovate and build partnerships that can complement, expand and deepen the Secretariat's reach and influence).

There was a widespread consensus among Secretariat management that working collaboratively as a trusted partner to the member countries was at the heart of its approach. Moreover, there was also a recognition of the need to invest in building strategic partnerships beyond project tactics and beneficiary relationships. However, management and staff do not have the bandwidth to utilise and leverage strategic partnerships as a core asset in their programmes, pressured as they are to respond to ever-increasing member country demands. This is a structural problem that the Secretariat will not resolve by getting more resources, but only by gaining greater focus and investing in organisational learning around how to build transformative partnerships in prioritised investment areas.

### Box 3.3. Partnerships and innovation

The Commonwealth is fundamentally different from other international bodies (such as the UN, European Union [EU], WTO, International Monetary Fund [IMF], World Bank). It is one of the world's oldest political associations of states, with colonial roots but modernised in 1949 when newly independent countries were allowed to become members without owing allegiance to the British Crown; member countries could also freely elect the Head of the Commonwealth. It is a voluntary network of 54 countries that are culturally and economically diverse, presenting a microcosm of the world, but with a common history, a common legal background and a common purpose. It is not treaty based, but based on a combination of agreed memorandum and memoranda of understanding and regulations; and is not dominated by the global powers. The members are not bound by treaty obligations; they are held together by shared traditions, institutions and experiences, as well as by economic self-interest. Unlike in any other multilateral system, countries voluntarily choose to be a member and, by virtue of membership, commit to the principles and values of the Commonwealth Charter: to uphold democracy and diversity/equality and promote good governance for sustainable development. This uniqueness presents a potentially powerful 'force for good', which in the context of today's global emergencies (for example, climate, migration, the pandemic, extremism, cybercrime, digital exclusion) is necessary more than ever before. But this can work only through a strong unifying vision and leadership.

Power in the Commonwealth is diffuse and more distributed than in any other IGO. Today, the Commonwealth comprises 54 countries, including 32 of the world's 42 small states. About 85 per cent of its total population is concentrated in three countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Nearly 60 per cent of its members are small and vulnerable states that have limited voice in the UN, the World Bank, the WTO and the IMF, but take an equal seat at the Commonwealth table. Commonwealth action

is based upon consultation and consensus between members. This requires a delicate balancing of diverse political and economic interests and concerns, which are often at odds. Small states care most passionately about climate change and economic inequality, and generally prioritise technical support, which is largely funded through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC). By contrast, member countries with greater power in the global system, such as the UK and Canada, tend to prioritise the upholding of rights and democracy, gender, and the separation of powers. India's contribution to the CFTC has doubled in past years, while the UK today contributes less than half of what it used to; Canada, meanwhile, stopped contributing for a decade.

The Commonwealth Secretariat organises and co-ordinates Commonwealth activities and facilitates relations and consensus building between member countries. It works mostly with governments and behind the scenes, and does not have an agenda of its own: its agenda reflects the collective wishes of its members. This diffusion and complexity of the system make it necessary for the Secretariat to find a balance in meeting the diverse interests and needs through (among others) its strategy and platform for partnerships and innovation. 'Partnerships and innovation' is a new area for the Secretariat. Partnerships have always been built *ad hoc* on a project basis. Previously, there has been no real thinking around strategic partnerships and no coherence in building these. The new Innovations and Partnerships Unit, created in 2018, developed an organisational strategy centred on five partner groups (member countries, other regional and global international organisations, the 90 Commonwealth accredited organisations, the private sector, and knowledge and research institutes) and a digital knowledge-sharing and partnership-building platform called 'Commonwealth Innovation'<sup>33</sup> that seeks to facilitate networking and collaboration by making Commonwealth data, knowledge and tools (developed by the Secretariat and by others) accessible to everyone, and by bringing together all the key stakeholders and partner groups of the Commonwealth. The purpose is to build a knowledge-based understanding of the Commonwealth that creates opportunities for innovation. Ongoing partnership mapping provides information about potential partners that can help to fill knowledge gaps, which provides a basis for starting conversations or negotiations to develop partnerships that complement the Secretariat's own resources and expertise.

**Source:** From Internal Stakeholder Interviews on 'Partnerships and Innovations'.

### 3.3 Strategic resourcing and budgeting

#### Strategic prioritisation and budgeting

A review of 31 evaluations of the Secretariat's strategies, thematic work, programmes and country support conducted between January 2010 and July 2020 identified as the most common finding that the Secretariat *'is trying to "do too much", despite having decreasing resources and operating across a large membership'* and has no unified approach or system in place for the prioritisation and selection of interventions.<sup>34</sup>

The 2020 Mid-Term Review reported a positive improvement in ensuring project alignment with

the Strategic Plan, following the introduction of the comprehensive annual delivery plan and matrix in 2017. Annual delivery plans and budgets detail how the Secretariat intends to deliver in a particular year against the Strategic Plan targets and areas of focus, annually approved by the Board of Governors (BoG).

But the Mid-Term Review also flagged the need for adjustment of the process by which the annual plans and budgets are assessed, developed and approved, as it was found to be excessively heavy on the programme teams and *'not commensurate with the size of the budget'*, while timewise limiting their work to *'activity-based interventions that can be completed within the year'*.<sup>35</sup> The case studies conducted in this evaluation largely confirmed this finding and pointed to the small-sized project-

<sup>33</sup> See: <https://www.thecommonwealth.io/>

<sup>34</sup> Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit, Strategy, Portfolio, Partnership and Digital Division (SPPDD), Commonwealth Secretariat Evaluations 2010–2020: Top Findings and Recommendations.

<sup>35</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2020), Mid-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2017/2018–2020/2021, p 29.

type of budget envelopes and their short (annual) timeframe as the main reason for the Secretariat's inability to achieve and demonstrate results against its longer-term Strategic Outcomes. Middle management was also found to be so burdened by small project-based reporting requirements and bureaucracy, that there was little time left to identify, articulate and demonstrate what strategically should be done, how and why.

Furthermore, the case studies also confirmed the finding of the Mid-Term Review that the divisional budget allocation process remained seen by staff as being opaque and political (not transparent and strategic), with implications for perceptions and trust in the Secretariat's corporate governance (see also [Section 3.5](#)). There has been an air of uncertainty around programme design and project planning: managers often lack information about the size of available budgets, how to access or secure these budgets, and how higher-level decisions about budget allocations are made. The case study findings presented in [Box 3.4](#) illustrate this.

This evaluation therefore acknowledges the need for further improvement of the planning and budgeting process to make it less bureaucratic, longer term (biennial) and better aligned with CHOGMs, with a transparent system for prioritisation and budget allocation. This would help to resolve many of the challenges that inhibit or even undermine the leveraging of the Secretariat's core assets and mandate (mentioned in [Section 3.2](#)).

### Human resourcing

The 2020 Mid-Term Review signalled the absence of an accompanying and dovetailed human resources process to match the Secretariat's strategic and programmatic ambitions, and recommended the allocation of sufficient resources to programmes to *'extract the most value from the Secretariat's technical expertise and avoid dilution of its impact in the member states'*.<sup>36</sup>

This evaluation further identified the challenge that programme units face when trying to balance

#### Box 3.4. Case study findings regarding budget non-transparency and uncertainty

Both internal and external stakeholders interviewed in the electoral support case study raised the issue of inflexible and non-transparent budgeting processes, and lengthy bureaucratic budget approval procedures, creating high levels of uncertainty and delay in processes often requiring immediate action. The size of the budgets needing approval (between £10 and £20,000 for technical assistance engagements) often fails to outweigh the level of time and effort. Partners complained that this made it very difficult to collaborate with the Secretariat. Staff raised the issue of budget non-transparency and uncertainty in the transitioning to the new strategy.

Although the Electoral Support Section have the largest budget (£355,000 per year) this is very small compared to the real costs. For instance, in Pakistan and Zimbabwe, the Secretariat had to engage a security firm to address urgent security issues, for which the total cost of each of the missions was in excess of £300,000. Awaiting approval of the new strategy and action plan (delayed due to COVID), a budget extension of £30,000 was granted for the three-month extension period of July to September 2021. Estimated costs for the upcoming elections in Zambia, however, were £390,000 (£300,000 for the observation mission, £60,000 for high-level conflict prevention, and £30,000 for grassroots-level conflict prevention and prevention of extremism). Funds for this mission came from a new Democracy Designated Fund, which consists of savings and underspends from across the Secretariat's portfolio. While the Electoral Support Section (ESS) was grateful for these funds, as they would allow the Zambia engagements to proceed, concerns were expressed regarding the inability to plan effectively – due to both the amount of funds, which was not commensurate with the amount of work ESS was expected to deliver on, and the lack of transparency in terms of when and how the funds would be distributed.

36 Commonwealth Secretariat (2020), Mid-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2017/2018–2020/2021, p xv and 28.



in-house technical expertise with externally contracted support in a way that avoids reputation damage (see [Section 3.2](#)). The case studies revealed a need to retain and strengthen the Secretariat's technical expertise in niche areas as a core asset that underpins its credibility and reputation as a trusted partner. This would enable the fast-track backstopping of important implementation gaps in national and cross-geographic policy processes and the engagement of high-capacity consultants or partners to expand its delivery capacity.

Another challenge also raised in the Mid-Term Review and confirmed by most of the internal stakeholders interviewed by this evaluation, concerned the need for a more strategic approach to talent acquisition and retention linked to organisational development:<sup>37</sup> *'Project staff felt that the current rotation system in particular, as well as the overall lack of a talent acquisition strategy, was weakening the organisation through loss of talent and institutional memory'*. Staff are recruited on the basis of three-year contracts (renewable for one or two terms) through a rotation system that gives equal opportunity to professionals from all member countries. Many come to work at the Secretariat temporarily, with the purpose to get access to better positions outside the Secretariat after the first term. Hence, they tend to focus on building short-term credentials and visibility for their next career move.

Longer-term career paths may create entrenching structures with a built-in incentive bias towards working only in the specialised 'niche' areas. However, without a long-term career perspective within the Secretariat, people are unlikely to be willing to plan and think more strategically, engage in organisational learning and innovation, and invest in building the expertise for achieving longer-term outcomes. Hence the importance of a human resource and organisational development strategy that takes into account the need for longer-term in-house core competency development and shorter-term expert acquisition, while at the same time also creating opportunities for staff to advance in their professional life. This was also found to be very important by Senior Management and was identified as one of the priority action points for the new Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25.

## Conclusion

An important finding from the 2020 Mid-Term Review that was reconfirmed by the case studies in this evaluation concerned the improvement needed to the planning and budgeting system to enable Secretariat management and staff to plan and work more strategically. Making the system less bureaucratic, more transparent, longer term (biennial) and better aligned with CHOGMs would help resolve many of the challenges that inhibit or even undermine the leveraging of the Secretariat's core assets and mandate (as mentioned in [Section 3.2](#)).

Additionally, the Secretariat urgently needs a strategic rearrangement for human resourcing, talent acquisition and retention, and for organisational development, particularly in view of the post-pandemic work practices. This is important because: a) its technical 'niche' know-how is a core asset that underpins its credibility and reputation as a trusted partner, enabling fast-track backstopping and engagement of high-capacity consultants/partners; and (b) retainment of high-quality staff helps to build the institutional memory and profile, and encourages investment in learning and innovation needed to enable the Secretariat to deliver on its bigger ambitions. Hence the importance of strategically balancing longer-term core competency development (linked to internal career paths) and shorter-term expert acquisition (linked to opportunities for learning and advancement).

## 3.4 Strategic evaluation and learning

### Results-based monitoring and evaluation

The Secretariat has an evaluation strategy and long-term plan covering the current Strategic Plan period. It also produces (and reports against) annual evaluation work plans. Evaluations, managed centrally by the Strategy, Portfolio, Partnerships and Digital Division (SPPDD), conform to the long-term evaluation plans. Occasionally, evaluations are added to the plan during the Strategic Plan period at the request of the Senior Management Committee (SMC).

At the time of writing, 23 centrally managed evaluations had been published that related to work in the previous and current Strategic Plan

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p 43.

periods. These include: a meta-evaluation of studies, conducted in 2005–2016; a review of 31 evaluations of the Secretariat's strategies, thematic work, programmes and country support, conducted in 2010–2020; a summative evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2013/14–2016/17; and the Mid-Term Review of the current Strategic Plan. Apart from this Mid-Term Review, five published evaluations relate to the current Strategic Plan period. Two further centrally managed evaluations have been conducted in parallel with this evaluation of the current Strategic Plan: one on the Secretariat's support to small and vulnerable states (SVs) and one on the Consensus Building Programme.<sup>38</sup> Dedicated efforts have been made in recent years to improving the quality of evaluation, documentation and dissemination of learning by producing evaluation summaries, presentations and organising a learning conference during 2021.

The Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit under SPPDD has helped the organisation to make a shift towards results-based programming in the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21. Managers and staff across the organisation understand the importance of 'managing for results' and have invested in building internal capacity for results-based M&E. There was an M&E plan and a M&E budget, and this has helped to build an organisation-wide understanding and demand for M&E.

An evidence mapping of evaluations during 2013/14–2019/20, however, revealed that while this significant investment in results-based management has generated strong evidence of its effectiveness at the output level, that evidence of outcome-level results – in particular of the Secretariat's technical support – remains weak.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, evidence-based learning and utilisation of M&E findings for decision-making have remained fairly limited. This was also confirmed by the Mid-Term Strategy Review conducted in 2019/20 and the review of 32 evaluations conducted between 2010 and 2020, and by the internal stakeholder interviews conducted for this evaluation.

Crucially, while political considerations may influence the decisions at the highest level (that is, at the level of the Board and Senior Management

Committee), this evaluation found there to be a perception that these decisions were not always evidence based. The persistent lack of transparency in the divisional budget allocation and planning process (mentioned in [Section 3.3](#)) seems to confirm this. Senior Management countered this by referring to the large number of documents shared for review prior to Senior Management Committee meetings and to the engagement of staff in these meetings, bringing their evidence into the discussions. In a continuous learning environment, however, it seems there is room for improvement in the types of evidence and ways evidence is generated and shared to enhance the efficiency of evidence uptake and use for strategic decision-making.

Progress made in the area of M&E during 2017/18–2020/21 has been significant and has laid the foundation for the development of a more integrated and co-ordinated outcome- and impact-focused M&E system that can generate better evidence and is more utilisation focused. The gap in knowledge and understanding between management and technical M&E staff has largely been bridged. One of the elements that has contributed to this was the introduction of a mandatory management response to evaluations up to the level of the Senior Management Committee. Engagement with M&E has significantly increased, which is a major step forward on the steep slope of organisational M&E capacity development. The organisation is ready to take the next step and redesign its approach and system to focus more on the utilisation of evidence of 'collective impact' generated through working, measuring and learning together.

### Impact Pathways

The Secretariat's Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit of SPPDD has started a collaborative process of identifying Impact Pathways (IPs) across the Secretariat's portfolio that could form the basis for developing an organisational Theory of Change (ToC) to help generate better evidence for collective learning and impact. Staff from across the different divisions and units have engaged in a series of workshops to identify and map out the organisation's collective IPs.

The case study findings of this evaluation evidenced the relevance of the IPs. All cases were guided by an implicit or explicit programme ToC that combined

<sup>38</sup> The evaluators have received the draft reports of these evaluations.

<sup>39</sup> See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), 'Evidence Mapping Notes', internal document.

and integrated the IPs in various ways to generate desired benefits and contribution to change in and across the Commonwealth member countries. Specifically, the Secretariat's contribution – as illustrated by the case study findings (see [Box 3.1](#) in [Section 3.1](#) and Annex III) – combined and integrated the following four IPs, which can be considered as the main *delivery IPs*:

- IPI – facilitating knowledge sharing and networking;
- IPII – creating the policy and legislative environment;
- IPIII – developing the institutional capacity; and
- IPIV – facilitating consensus building and enhanced advocacy.

The Secretariat's delivery of benefits and contribution to change were backed by a further two IPs that form the organisational or *enabling IPs*:

- IPIV – enhancing the Commonwealth system and action network through leveraging of the Secretariat's core assets and mandate (for example, its historical role and position, its convening power, its technical niche areas, and its trust-based partnerships); and
- IPI VI – accelerating action and delivery through more reflexive, risk-informed and agile management-for-results and evidence-based learning.

The IPs are relatively new and not yet fully institutionalised in the Secretariat's planning, evaluation and learning processes. As such, they have not yet demonstrated their value for generating better evidence to incite cross-programmatic learning and synergy for impact. The aspiration of the IPs is to move in that direction in the next Strategic Plan.

Building a hierarchy of Impact Pathways that makes the distinction between the two levels of 'contribution to impact' and 'organisational enablers', and shows the causal relations that connects them in an overarching organisational ToC, would help create greater clarity around the purpose of the IPs. It would also help to better define and communicate what is meant by 'impact' and identify what type of evidence is needed to demonstrate the Secretariat's contribution to impact. Furthermore, it would help to better define and measure the enabling role and

contribution of partnerships and innovations and of effective organisation to deliver its contribution to impact (as distinct from evidence on project organisational performance).

Lastly, developing the organisational ToC around the organisation's prioritised key topics or big-ticket items (as suggested in the [Section 3.1](#)), and defining what gender mainstreaming concretely means in these areas, would help identify and explain cross-programmatic linkages and synergies<sup>40</sup> and build a shared evidence-based learning agenda for the organisation that encourages cross-divisional and cross-unit collaboration and learning about gender-mainstreamed 'tactical' ways of working<sup>41</sup> in a more systematic way. This would empower the Secretariat to gain the commitment of partners and funders, better match its resources to its ambitions, build strategic partnerships around its 'core business' areas, make its delivery models more gender responsive and adaptive to changing contexts, and build the evidence base that can demonstrate its contribution to impact and its unique role in the grand scheme of events.

## Conclusion

Collective consensus-building and partnership-based change processes that are political and involve many influences are often unpredictable and not linear. Results-based management (RBM) programming is a management approach that is designed to control implementation processes to achieve *planned/desired* results and therefore collects *descriptive* (not *explanatory*) data of individual and aggregated project results. It does not collect evidence that explains the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of both *intended* and *unintended* outcomes and of unpredictable interactions and contextual shifts. Therefore, it cannot answer questions of bigger and more complex contribution to impact in a political intergovernmental context. This is certainly the case for the Secretariat, whose agenda is demand driven. Given the complexity and dynamism of the environments in which the Secretariat works, RBM is insufficient to enable its

40 For example, in the area of digital trade and finance: linking sustainable debt (and risk) management to climate finance access, sustainable natural resource management, and to economic recovery investment planning and finance access for digitalisation of trade.

41 See: the Secretariat as an 'incubator of change' ([Section 3.3](#)).

staff, management and partners to collaboratively build and use evidence to learn about progress and contribution to change and navigate the politics and unpredictabilities inherent to intergovernmental decision-making.

Acknowledging this, there is a clear need and demand for better evidence that is focused on the 'big picture', on how and where the Secretariat can make a big difference, the few big-ticket items where it *must* demonstrate impact in the coming period, and what type of evidence is needed for strategic decision-making.

This evaluation strongly supports the Secretariat's plan to redesign its M&E system and move towards a theory-based approach in the next strategy period 2021/22–2024/25 that is more utilisation focused, enables organisational learning across programmatic areas and levels, and enables strong leadership. Moving forward, it will be helpful to develop an organisational Theory of Change (ToC) that: (a) links the organisational enablers with the delivery of impact; (b) centres on thematically prioritised and gender mainstreamed big-ticket items in the four strategic outcome areas; and (c) depicts the linkages and synergies between these to encourage evidence-based learning and collaboration across units and divisions. Furthermore, it will be helpful to define the selective models of the Secretariat's 'ways of working' and its Impact Pathways in terms of clear stages of development, which would enable it to create an institutional impact dashboard.

### 3.5 Effective organisation

#### Corporate governance

The Commonwealth Secretariat has developed a robust system of accountability for project and other expenditure approvals. However, this system was experienced by many of the internal stakeholders that were interviewed in this evaluation as laborious, involving a large number of steps that management must take. It may take up to six months or more, to get a project or specific expenditure (for example, for a consultant) approved, even if it is for a small amount (for example, 15 or 70 or 100,000 GBP are treated equally). If not planned or foreseen, this may leave insufficient time for implementation within the fiscal year if the project is initiated halfway (for example, when member countries approve a project mid-cycle, when a proposal is

submitted for extra-budgetary resources [EBR]-funded projects or for activities that redeploy the Secretariat's underspends, or when CFTC budgets are identified only in the last two quarters). Middle management tends to be more occupied with procedural approvals for the smallest expenditures than with 'strategic direction setting' for their programmes. This was also found by the 2020 Mid-Term Review: *'Project leads may manage budgets of over £1 million but find their individual threshold for financial approval set at £5,000'*, creating endless delays and hindering delivery *'even though from an organisational perspective, there are strong internal controls in place'*.<sup>42</sup> The Corporate Compliance Unit acknowledged this challenge and works hard on streamlining procedures to avoid duplication, link budgets to results, and enhance organisational performance.

Major progress has been made through the establishment of quarterly performance review meetings that engage procurement, gender, strategy planning, M&E, human resources (HR), programme management and corporate leadership into a joint reflection on budget expenditure and performance. These meetings were found to be quite useful for establishing relationships and dialogue across the organisation, but also time consuming and ineffective in helping to reduce underspending to the 5 per cent target of planned budgets. Despite investment in management capacity building, the problem of underspending and weak (financial) planning and performance persists.

The organisation has established a risk-based audit programme that twice or three times a year conducts internal audits at an average cost of £6,000–8,000, focused on issues identified by internal risk assessments. Additionally, there are up to three mandatory external audits conducted annually and concurrently, based on financial statements. From a corporate compliance perspective, the audits are necessary for compliance as an essential part of a corporate governance and risk management structure: *'The cost of poor controls is going to well exceed the cost of an audit, not to mention potential reputational damage.'* Echoing the Mid-Term Review findings, however, staff and middle management found

<sup>42</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2020), Mid-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2017/2018–2020/2021, p 44.

corporate governance to be too controlling and too bureaucratic, and lacking the agility needed to respond to fast-changing contexts afflicted by pandemics and climate emergencies.

Governing boards generally have a duty to scrutinise and challenge, as well as to co-create and support strategy. Over the last several years, for various reasons, the balance has rested more with the former than the latter. The 2013/14–2016/17 strategy involved an extraordinarily long two-year negotiation within/between the BoG and the Secretariat, which formed the basis of the Strategic Plan 2017/18–2020/21. From there, the BoG shifted to more micro-level negotiations and compliance management centred around the annual delivery plans. About 52 BoG meetings were held in the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21 (this was on average every month and is rarely seen in any organisation, even with an executive board), which has taken a toll on Secretariat resources and staff morale.<sup>43</sup> There is a tendency within the Secretariat to see the BoG as a controlling auditor rather than a supportive partner.

Among the few BoG members who responded to this evaluation, there was a growing frustration in the past year around the lack of focus. They perceived the Secretariat as being rather weak at strategically prioritising and proactively making focused proposals to the Board. There is no evidence this view is shared by other Board members. However, both internal and external stakeholders reported a widely shared perception of an apparent breakdown in trust between the Board and Senior Management, which poses an important risk to the future of the organisation and the Commonwealth as a whole. This therefore requires due attention in the coming strategic period.

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43 The main decisions with regards to the Commonwealth and its Secretariat are made at CHOGMs, which present an 'intensely political alignment' between the 54 Heads of Government and the Secretary-General. The Secretary-General receives its mandate directly from the Heads. No BoG or Senior Management members are in these meetings. Following the CHOGM, the level of decision-making is the intergovernmental ministerial meetings across different sectors. Beneath the ministerial meetings are the officials' meetings with the BoG (composed of diplomatic High Commission Representatives of the member countries) overseeing the work. In principle, the BoG is a non-executive Board. It seems that only recently it started to act more like an executive board.

## Structure and culture

Echoing the 2020 partnership and other evaluations, internal stakeholder interviews for this evaluation confirmed that the organisational structure and culture were seen as being unbalanced and discouraging of cross-divisional collaboration and alignment. For instance, the division working on the strategic outcome area of good governance and democracy (GPD) reports directly to the Secretary-General, while the other divisions working on sustainable and inclusive development, climate resilience and small states report to the Deputy Secretary-General (thus operating along different lines of reporting and accountability).

A disturbing indication of low staff morale has built up over the past few years on well-established online platforms<sup>44</sup> providing information about employment. The issues that have contributed to this, according to the internal stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation, include: the lack of an incentive structure; inadequate staff performance appraisal and follow-up; and a rotation policy that limits long-term career opportunities with the Secretariat. These matters are already being considered in the new Strategic Plan.

In addition, issues of low staff morale and their health and well-being due to COVID are being carefully considered and addressed as part of improvements to the Secretariat's HR policy. A staff survey conducted mid-2020 during COVID lockdown suggests that staff do feel taken care of and are satisfied with the flexible work options offered to them.

Moving onto the new strategy, some progress has also been reported on countering low staff morale through the establishment of a staff association that holds monthly staff meetings, a staff grievance mechanism, a working group on the implications of COVID-19 for staff and their families, and the work-from-home policy. Concrete plans have been made for HR and organisational development to address (among others) the challenge of talent acquisition and retention and to strengthen leadership in supporting and rewarding staff performance (see also [Section 3.3](#)).

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44 An example is Glassdoor.

## Gender mainstreaming

The 2020 Mid-Term-Review reported that the Secretariat had undertaken important steps to enable gender mainstreaming in both its programming (through training and guidance) and in its internal organisation (through gender mainstreaming in policies). These were geared towards achieving gender-responsive outcomes across its portfolio, for example, through improved gender analysis and gender-sensitive RBM.

A synthesis of country monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) reports produced by the Secretariat's Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Unit (under SPPDD) for the virtual Commonwealth Learning Week that was held 27–29 April 2021, revealed that gender mainstreaming in programming was generally weak and systematic MEL related to gender mainstreaming was largely absent.<sup>45</sup>

The multi-case study conducted for this evaluation confirmed that there were 'pocket' examples of a gender-sensitive approach, mostly in those areas where attention to women's empowerment and gender equality was more evident and driven by 'demand' (for example, political participation of women in democratic elections, gender-focused programmes such as VAWG/ gender-based violence [GBV], and women's empowerment and participation in trainings, advocacy, security/conflict prevention and the prevention of extremism).

Interviews conducted with internal stakeholders, however, suggested that significant improvements to gender mainstreaming were yet to be seen, and staff knowledge and skills to mainstream gender in their work remained weak. Significantly, while project design documents (PDDs) include a gender box, interviewees confirmed that it was largely up to individual unit teams as to whether projects and programmes emerged with a gender lens that informed programmatic theories of change and associated ways of working. A similar challenge faces the Secretariat in its work to mainstream a youth focus: the youth team has a clear way of working, but this is reported to be essentially outward-facing and focused on youth-specific programming (rather than on mainstreaming).

Reportedly, as at the time of writing, there was no integrated and centrally managed approach to ensure that gender and youth were mainstreamed across the portfolio and the organisation and that inward-facing organisational learning supported outward-facing programming. Neither HR nor the Economic, Youth and Sustainable Development (EYSD) Directorate (Gender and Youth Units) seem to be taking a lead on this. As a result, there is no systematic follow-up and support to mainstreaming gender and youth.

An important question is whether this is due to a lack of awareness and commitment of leadership, whether it is a genuine challenge of resources and MEL, or perhaps rather a structural issue.<sup>46</sup> Generally, the resources that are invested in gender mainstreaming do show the level of commitment of an organisation and its leadership to gender and youth. But in an organisation that is largely driven by member country demand (rather than filtered by the potential for transformative change, for example, in gender and intergenerational inequalities) and consistently experiences chronic resource constraints, it is extremely difficult to do a good job at mainstreaming and demonstrating progress on gender equality and youth inclusion. Although understandable, this doesn't justify the lack of a systematic and integrated approach to gender and youth mainstreaming.

## Conclusion

Middle management tends to be more occupied with procedural approvals for the smallest expenditures than with 'strategic direction setting' for their programmes, due to ongoing inefficiencies in the planning and budgeting system. Despite the improvements made with the quarterly performance review meetings and the investments in management capacity building, underspending and weak (financial) planning and performance persist.

With audits being conducted on average bimonthly and board meetings held on average monthly, corporate governance was found to be too controlling, too bureaucratic and lacking the agility needed to operate effectively in fast-changing contexts. Widely shared among stakeholders was also the perception that an apparent breakdown in

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<sup>45</sup> See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), *Synthesis of Country Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Reports*, Commonwealth Learning Week 27–29 April, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

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<sup>46</sup> These are generally the main reasons for the failure of gender mainstreaming in organisations and across their portfolios.

trust between the Board and Senior Management posed a fundamental risk to the future of the organisation and the Commonwealth as a whole.

The organisational structure and culture were seen as being unbalanced and discouraging of cross-divisional collaboration and alignment. Issues of HR management have affected staff morale. During COVID, however, the Secretariat has shown it cares for its staff. Moving into the new strategy period,

plans are being made for HR and organisational development to address the issues raised by the MTR and this evaluation.

The Secretariat has undertaken important steps to integrate gender and youth into its programming and organisation. Mainstreaming, however, remains rather weak and systematic M&E of such mainstreaming is largely absent. An integrated and centrally managed approach is still lacking.

# 4. Recommendations

## 4.1 Major achievements

During the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21, the Commonwealth Secretariat has achieved quite a lot across its 54 member countries, spanning almost the entire sustainable development spectrum and all with very modest budgets. Stakeholder feedback from the case studies confirmed the Secretariat's programmes are, in general, relevant and effective in delivering desired results and generating tangible benefits for the member countries.

Throughout the strategy period, the Secretariat maintained a strong reputation as a global intergovernmental organisation. It has become the partner of choice for a wide range of organisations, signing outcome-oriented MoUs with some 42 multilateral partners and consolidating constructive partnerships with around 89 Commonwealth-accredited organisations.

As confirmed by both internal and external stakeholders and by the 2021 evaluation on consensus building, the Secretariat strategically uses its convening power to create a 'table for difficult conversations' and to enable major global SDG-related breakthroughs, notably: in the development of the Call to Action on Land, the Blue Charter, the Climate Finance Access Hub and the 'Commonwealth says no more' one-stop shop on violence against women and girls (VAWG). It synergistically combines consensus building with tactical technical support, knowledge sharing and networking to develop shared 'good governance' standards and to progressively influence change in policy/legislation, institutions and systems in areas as wide as: democracy and the rule of law, trade and competitiveness, youth and jobs, health and education, gender and social inclusion, climate resilience and the protection of oceans and land, and much more. To achieve all the above, it works effectively across the different levels of the Commonwealth system (CHOGM, intergovernmental ministerial meetings and action groups, national officials and institutions, and global, regional and national partners) to identify, promote and embed change, while injecting small-budget technical support for tools and platforms where

there is an unmet need and an opportunity for scaling in/out.

## 4.2 Lessons learned

As an intergovernmental membership organisation made up of 54 member country governments with a diverse makeup that includes small countries, LDCs, small island states and G7/G5 countries, the Secretariat has an 'inherently complex' task. This is not least in:

- balancing the multiple CHOGM mandates and member country government demands on a tiny budget;
- maintaining the flexibility/agility to act and tactically work in 'the gap' when the opportunity arises, while also not spreading too thin and complying with RBM and the oversight of the BoG;
- maintaining the ability to provide a highly appreciated rapid response function (for example, in Mauritius and on the Sri Lanka oil spill), while keeping its longer-term strategic work 'on the rails'; and
- ensuring a staff that has the skill set to provide relevant, credible and focused support across its programme portfolio and also represents the five regions.

Demonstrating better outcomes and higher impact levels in such a complex environment, with barely €32 million on average per year, is extremely challenging. Also, communication of 'who we are' and 'why we are' is challenging in an organisation that is so focused on demand delivery, while being burdened by heavy bureaucracy and compliance procedures. Further faced with declining financial resources, *'trying to be everything to everyone and on almost every issue'* is highly unsustainable.<sup>47</sup> Attempts to streamline and narrow down the Strategic Outcomes over the past two Strategic

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<sup>47</sup> See: High Level Group on the Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat (2018), Second Report, December, p 25.



Plans has not yet brought greater focus: even within these areas, member countries' demands keep on growing, while funds further decline.

The Secretariat has undertaken important steps to enable 'managing for results' and gender and youth mainstreaming in both its programming and in its internal organisation. As a result, project-level effectiveness and gender- and youth-specific programme results have improved. Mainstreaming, however, remains rather weak and systematic M&E of this mainstreaming is largely absent. Missing is an integrated and centrally managed approach to organisational development and learning around gender and youth mainstreaming.

### 4.3 Recommendations on the way forward

Going forward, the new Strategic Plan provides a wonderful opportunity to build on the achievements of the current period and respond to the challenges ahead. There is an opportunity for the Secretariat to reinforce its commitment to higher-level change by strengthening the way it understands and demonstrates its unique contribution to addressing the most important global issues that are of major concern to the Commonwealth. This can be more learning oriented while also being evidence driven, with gender and youth alongside small and vulnerable states effectively mainstreamed. Underpinning this important opportunity is the need to strengthen organisational learning and make governance of the Secretariat fit for purpose by shifting accountability upwards to the higher (outcome/impact) results level. In this way, governance oversight can more fully recognise what the Secretariat has and can be ('we are the petri dish – you can experiment with us').

Based on its findings, this evaluation proposes the following recommendations, mapped to the five dimensions or areas of change covered:

#### Focus and synergy

1. Organise an externally facilitated and inclusive process (preferably in an offline event) at the start of the new strategy period (and before the next Mid-Term Review) to:
  - o build a shared vision and intent among the Commonwealth leadership (including at the highest level) around how to

unleash the potential power of the Commonwealth's unique and historical identity and role as a 'force for good';

- o create clarity and alignment around the Secretariat's unique value proposition (UVP) and core mandate; and
- o adopt an organisation-wide UVP-centred and thematically prioritised approach to identify few big investment topics on which the Secretariat will need to 'move the needle' and develop coherent and joined-up programmes to demonstrate its contribution to impact.

Since the Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 has already been provisionally approved by the BoG, the process will need to inform a mid-strategic period pivot and therefore will need to happen *before* the mid-term review of the Strategic Plan (so as to avoid running from one evaluation into the other, without making a significant breakthrough on this point).

The process will need to go beyond the classic reviews and consultations and take a highly collaborative and outcome-focused approach, engaging a cross-section of internal and external stakeholders (including Senior and Middle Management, members of the BoG, key strategic partners, and a few 'critical friends' who understand the unique history and identity of the Commonwealth and can bring an unbiased external perspective to the discussions).

At the time of writing, the CHOGM was expected to be held in the next few months (end of 2021 or early 2022) and would mark an important moment for the process. Echoing the recommendation of the second 2018 report of the High Level Group on Governance,<sup>48</sup> the Secretariat will need to prepare and assist Commonwealth Heads of Government to identify the few topics on which it can and will need to move the needle in the coming period (triangulating priorities related to the SDGs, COVID-19 recovery, small states' resilience and the Commonwealth's unique role in the world).

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<sup>48</sup> High Level Group on the Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat (2018), Second Report, December, p 6.

## Leveraging of core assets and mandate

2. As part of the above process, develop a shared understanding of the Secretariat's core assets and of how these could be renewed and leveraged in the changing world to enable the Secretariat to deliver and demonstrate its contribution to impact on the big-ticket items.
3. Draw on the evidence from this and other recent evaluations to inform this discussion and reach agreement around a selective set of models of 'ways of working' that the Secretariat should use and adapt moving forward. Develop a learning agenda and guidance for staff and partners to pilot-test and adapt these models across the prioritised big-ticket areas. An important topic for evidence-based learning in the next Strategic Plan will be how the Secretariat's combined knowledge generation and sharing, technical assistance, and consensus building could become more effective and better address the challenges of working in a digitalised world.
4. Strengthen the Secretariat's Innovations and Partnerships Unit to:
  - o develop strategic partnerships and collaborations (beyond tactical beneficiary relationships) that concretely help Secretariat units expand their reach and influence in the prioritised topic areas, beyond the scope of what they can do on their own;
  - o build 'strategic partnership' competency across the organisation, embedded in organisational learning around leveraging core assets; and
  - o construct a baseline for the prioritised big-ticket topics (for example, drawing on Commonwealth big data) as the basis for identifying hot spots for impact-focused 'gap filling'.

## Resourcing and budgeting

5. Sharpen the focus and strategically align the programme portfolios around the prioritised big-ticket items, while maintaining sufficient margin (for example, 20%) for the delivery of assistance on demand (based on well-

defined selection criteria). Strategically invest in strengthening the Secretariat's in-house technical competencies, while also attracting external talent to develop and test the new models to revamp and leverage core assets in the prioritised areas.

6. Put in place a human resourcing, talent acquisition and retainment, and organisational development strategy centred on these prioritised big-ticket areas, balancing longer-term core competency development (linked to internal career paths) and shorter-term expert acquisition (linked to opportunities for learning and advancement). Consider including a review of the rotation policy as a retention strategy.
7. Ensure realistic budgeting in these few priority areas, based on a credible design, costing and appraisal of investments needed to build the know-how and competencies to deliver on the priorities and demonstrate impact.

## Evaluation and learning

8. Put in place an organisation-wide strategic evaluative learning agenda to demonstrate the contribution to impact of coherent and joined-up programmes and test and adapt combined 'ways of working' models in the above big-ticket areas.
9. Develop an adaptive, contribution- and utilisation-focused M&E-for-learning (or MEL) approach that:
  - o draws on an organisational Theory of Change that links Impact Pathways and organisational enablers;
  - o defines the models and their Impact Pathways in terms of clear stages of development that can be tracked and shared on an institutional impact dashboard;
  - o is centred on the core set of prioritised big-ticket items to develop an organisation-wide evaluative learning culture;
  - o has (bi-)annual moments for cross-unit reflection and learning around how the Secretariat's programmes combine and integrate the Impact Pathways,

- build cross-programmatic linkages and synergies, and develop innovative and adaptive delivery models backed by strategic partnerships and innovation;
- o uses methods and tools that are easy, light and fun to use and help programme teams to generate and use better evidence that is inclusive, credible, gender responsive and empowering; and
- o generate the type of evidence that is useful for higher-level decisions and interactions with the Board.

### Effective organisation

10. Continue simplifying and streamlining planning and budget approval processes, and strengthening (financial) planning and performance.
11. Downsize and streamline RBM and planning and budgeting systems to make room for evaluative and organisational learning.
12. Consider a rethink of the organisational structure to better connect 'strategy, evaluation and learning' with gender (and youth) mainstreamed programme delivery, and assign organisational mainstreaming responsibilities to a cross-cutting youth and gender unit.
13. Build leadership competencies and develop clear standards for downward accountability and transparency.
14. Develop a strategic approach to human resourcing, talent acquisition and retainment, and organisational development and intentionally rebuild staff morale and responsibility (see also Recommendation 7).
15. Engage selective Board members in the facilitated process of revamping the Secretariat's core mandate, assets and value proposition (see also Recommendations 1 and 2). Ideally, this also involves a thought process to redefine and rebalance internal stakeholder roles and responsibilities (including those of the BoG) for more effective delivery on priorities in volatile contexts.

# Annexes

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| Opeyemi Abebe                     | Adviser and Head, Trade Competitiveness (TONR), Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Unnikrishnan Nair                 | Head of Climate Change (EYSD), Commonwealth Secretariat  |
| Andrew Baines                     | Programme Officer Elections (GPD), Commonwealth Secretariat  |
| Mac Banda                         | Adviser and Team Leader, Meridian (EYSD), Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Pamella McLaren                   | Adviser, Meridian (EYSD), Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Joanne Allin                      | Adviser, Meridian (EYSD), Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Sanjay Kumar                      | Adviser, Meridian (EYSD), Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Ernest Adjei                      | Adviser, Meridian (EYSD), Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Erin Tunks                        | Adviser in the Senior Director's Office (GPD), Commonwealth Secretariat  |
| Francisca Pretorius               | Office of Civil and Criminal. Justice Reform (OCCJR) Adviser and Head (GPD), Commonwealth Secretariat                        |
| Travis Mitchell                   | Adviser and Head, Economic Policy and Small States (EYSD), Commonwealth Secretariat  |
| Collin Zhuawu                     | Economic Adviser, (Multilateral Trade) International Trade Policy (TONR), Commonwealth Secretariat                           |
| Stanislas Nkhata                  | Director, Debt Management Programme, Macroeconomic and Financial Management Institute of Eastern and Southern Africa (MEFMI) |
| Bakary Krubally                   | Director of Loans and Debt Management, Ministry of Finance, Zambia   |
| Technical team (Adama and others) | Loans and Debt Management, Ministry of Finance, Zambia   |
| Enow Dickson                      | Adviser to the President of ELECAM, Cameroon   |
|                                   | CEO at the SIEC (Solomon Islands Electoral Commission)   |
| Freddie                           | Operations Manager at the SIEC (Solomon Islands Electoral Commission)  |
| George Amoh                       | Executive Secretary of the Ghana National Peace Council  |
| Julietta Edinborough              | Deputy Director, Statistics Department, Eastern Caribbean Central Bank   |
| Selim Hossen                      | Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Commerce, Bangladesh   |
| Chris Southworth                  | Secretary-General, International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), UK   |
| Patrick Spaven                    | MEL Consultant and original Evaluation Team Lead   |
| Lawrence Othieno                  | Adviser, Trade Competitiveness, Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Elias Bakulu                      | Ag. Executive Director, Federation of East African Freight Forwarders Associations (FEAFFA)                                  |
| Flavia Busingye                   | Customs Director, EAC Secretariat  |
| Jonathan Sessange                 | Workshop trainer, EAC Secretariat  |
| Stephen Analo                     | Workshop trainer, EAC Secretariat  |
| Agnes Kithiia                     | Shipping and Logistics, Kenya Co-operative Coffee Exporters Ltd  |
| Yinka Bandele                     | Adviser, Trade Competitiveness, Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Shahera McKoy                     | Manager, Export Belize at BELTRAIDE  |
| Yawar Naeem                       | Adviser, Trade Competitiveness Section, Trade, Oceans and Natural Resources Directorate, Commonwealth Secretariat            |
| Joel K Richards                   | Senior Technical Specialist – Trade, Permanent Delegation of the OECS in Geneva  |
| Noel Watson                       | CEO, A-Z Information Consultants   |

| Name              | Position  |
|-------------------|---|
| John Meafo        | Ministry of Mines, Industry and Technological Development (MINMIDT) (Retired)<br>Government of Cameroon |
| Suzy Nikièma      | Lead, Sustainable Investment, IISD  |
| Janneth Mghamba   | EYSD Directorate, Commonwealth Secretariat  |
| Emily Gilmour     | EYSD Directorate, Commonwealth Secretariat  |
| Miski Omar        | EYSD Directorate, Commonwealth Secretariat  |
| Sunia Soakai      | Deputy Director, NCD Prevention and Control Programme, SPC  |
| Jill Iliffe       | Executive Secretary, CNMF   |
| Ross Bailey       | Senior Advocacy Manager, Malaria No More UK   |
| Andrew Schofield  | Climate Action team, Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Javenik Henry     | Climate Action team, Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Uzoamaka Nwamarah | Climate Action team, Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Jamella Chesney   | Climate Action team, Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Nwamarah          | Climate Action team, Commonwealth Secretariat   |
| Jo Lomas          | UK Commonwealth Envoy   |
| Ms Anna Howells   | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office  |
| Ms Sarah Lingard  | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office  |
| Mr Paul Hailston  | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office  |

## Annex B: Mapping of the Secretariat's Portfolio for Case Selection (27 May 2021)

| 1. Democracy  |  |   |   |          |  |
|---|--|---|---|----------|--|
| Programme/Project   | Impact Pathway   | Mandate   | Benefits/changes  | Coverage | Learning value   |
| Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG)                    | 3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy  | Pan-Commonwealth with focus on most urgent member countries (CHOGM) | Member countries' commitment to Commonwealth's democratic values  |          | Ownership and commitment of member countries (Q1, Q5, Q6)  |
| Good Offices (1 vote; also suggested by the evaluators)         | 3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy  | Pan-Commonwealth with focus on most urgent member countries (CHOGM) | Sensitive domestic political tensions and disputes resolved in member countries   |          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult to measure contexts</li> <li>Contested by CS actors (Q1, Q3, Q5, Q6)</li> </ul> |
| Commonwealth Election Professionals (CEP)                       | 2. Institutional and capacity development  | Pan-Commonwealth with focus on most urgent member countries (CEN)   | Strengthened capacity of member countries to conduct fair, credible and inclusive elections   |          | (Q1, Q3)   |
| Consensus building by the Secretary-General                     | 3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy  | Pan-Commonwealth (CHOGM)  | Contentious issues affecting member countries (e.g. territorial disputes) resolved  |          | (Q4, Q6)   |
| Inclusive dialogue and enhanced women's political participation | 2. Institutional and capacity development<br>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy | ?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public dialogue reducing tension during elections</li> <li>Gained traction on closing the gender gap in elections</li> </ul> |          | (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4)   |

| 2. Public Institutions   |   |                              |  |  |   |
|--|---|------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Programme/Project  | Impact Pathway  | Mandate                      | Benefits/changes   | Coverage   | Learning value  |
| Strengthening public administration to enhance good governance   | 2. Institutional and capacity development   | Individual member countries? | Efficient and transparent public administration and domestic resource mobilisation in member countries (better spending, reduced corruption, achievement of NDPs and SDGs) | Malaysia, Kingdom of Eswatini, Tanzania... (Africa, Caribbean and Pacific) | Benefits for small and vulnerable member countries (Q1, Q3)   |
| Commonwealth Anti-Corruption Centre and Networks (2 votes; also suggested by the evaluators; though also included in the Medium-Term Review) | 2. Institutional and capacity development<br>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy<br>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking | Regions?                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective anti-corruption agencies and associations</li> <li>SDG16</li> </ul>   | Africa, Caribbean, Pacific Asian   | Strategic partnerships<br>Convening power<br>Regional strategy<br>Knowledge generation, sharing and networking<br>Model from African countries to be replicated to the Caribbean through capacity building (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q7) |
| Implementation of the Latimer House Principles in the Commonwealth   | 2. Institutional and capacity development<br>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy<br>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking | Pan-Commonwealth             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Member countries able to safeguard the separation of powers in their jurisdiction</li> <li>SDG16</li> </ul>                         |  | Strategic partnerships (Q1, Q2, Q4, Q6, Q7)   |

| Programme/Project   | Impact Pathway   | Mandate   | Benefits/changes   | Coverage | Learning value  |
|---|--|---|--|----------|---|
| Promoting the rule of law in the Commonwealth   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ul>             | UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office EBR with focus on most urgent member countries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity to co-operate in international cyber-crime investigations</li> <li>• Strengthened electronic cybersecurity</li> <li>• SDG16</li> </ul> |          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic partnerships</li> <li>• Convening power</li> <li>• Regional strategy</li> <li>• Knowledge generation, sharing and networking (Q1, Q4, Q6, Q7)</li> </ul> |
| Consensus building on rule of law   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> </ul>  | Pan-Commonwealth  | Common policy positions among 53 law ministers on global rule of law issues (e.g., SDGs, data protection, cybercrime, money laundering, financing terrorism, etc.)                       |          | Convening power   |
| Establishing and strengthening of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs)                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> </ul> | Pan-Commonwealth with focus on most urgent member countries                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective NHRIs</li> <li>• Strengthened rights protection against VAWG</li> <li>• SDG16</li> </ul>  |          | Knowledge generation, sharing and networking (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q8)   |
| Strengthening co-operation among member countries to tackle the illicit proliferation of conventional weapons | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ul>             | Pan-Commonwealth (CHOGM)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National implementation of international conventional arms control obligations</li> <li>• SDG16</li> </ul>                                      |          | Strategic partnerships (Q4)   |

| 3. Youth and Social Development  |   |   |   |  |   |
|--|---|---|---|--|---|
| Programme/Project  | Impact Pathways   | Mandate   | Benefits/changes  | Coverage                               | Learning value  |
| Convening of Commonwealth health ministers and senior officials  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ul>  | Pan-Commonwealth  | Access to health health coverage SDG3   | Individual member countries<br>Regions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective versus individual member country benefit</li> <li>• Convening power (Q1, Q3, Q4)</li> </ul>   |
| Education programme  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ul>  | Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) mandates<br>Extra-budgetary resources (EBR) | Access to global citizenship education and intercultural and religious literacy                                       |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CCEM mandate</li> <li>• Knowledge generation, sharing and networking (Q1, Q4, Q6)</li> </ul>   |
| Acceleration of universal health coverage, ensuring no one is left behind (1 vote, and also suggested by the evaluators) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ul> | Pan-Commonwealth  | Access to health health coverage SDG3   |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synergy and strategic leveraging of unique assets and comparative advantages</li> <li>• Thematic relevance for the future (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6, Q7, Q8)</li> </ul>              |
| Learning for Life (suggested by the evaluators)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy and legislative development</li> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ul>                 | Pan-Commonwealth (CCEM)   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to formal and non-formal quality education</li> <li>• SDG4</li> </ul> |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact Pathway 1</li> <li>• Synergy and strategic leveraging of unique assets and comparative advantages</li> <li>• Generation/use of evidence (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q7, Q8)</li> </ul> |

| Programme/Project   | Impact Pathways   | Mandate                  | Benefits/changes   | Coverage                              | Learning value  |
|---|---|--------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| Commonwealth Youth Programme (1 vote, and also suggested by the evaluators) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy and legislative development</li> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol> | Pan-Commonwealth (CHOGM) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthened youth sector</li> <li>• Youth participation and empowerment</li> </ul> |                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact Pathway 1</li> <li>• Strategic priority for 2021–2024</li> <li>• Synergy and strategic leveraging of unique assets and comparative advantages</li> <li>• Generation/use of evidence (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q7, Q8)</li> </ul> |
| Economic cost of VAWG   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol>   | Pan-Commonwealth (CHOGM) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevention of VAWG</li> <li>• SDG5</li> </ul>                                       | Small and vulnerable member countries | Knowledge generation / sharing (Q1, Q4, Q6, Q8)   |

| 4. Economic Development   |   |  |   |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|--|---|
| Programme/Project   | Impact Pathways   | Mandate  | Benefits/changes  | Coverage                                       | Learning value  |
| Commonwealth positions advanced in international development and financing mechanisms           | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol> | Pan-Commonwealth with focus on small states  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to disaster emergency finance</li> <li>• Sustainable government debt management</li> <li>• Access to finance technology</li> <li>• SDG17</li> </ul> | Small and other vulnerable states (incl. LDCs) | (Q1, Q2, Q4, Q7)  |
| Commonwealth Finance Ministers' Meeting (CFMM) and G20 outreach                                 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> </ol>   | Pan-Commonwealth (CFMM, Commonwealth G20, Commonwealth Ministerial Meeting for Small States) | Consensus among member countries on important economic issues and SDG financing   |  | Strategic leveraging of unique assets and comparative advantages (Q4) |
| Strengthening Public Debt Management Framework and government bond market in The Bahamas        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy and legislative development</li> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> </ol>  | Individual member countries  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable government debt management</li> <li>• SDG17</li> </ul>   | The Bahamas                                    | Impact Pathway 1 (Q1, Q2)   |
| Promoting International Sound Practices in Public Debt Management (suggested by the evaluators) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy and legislative development</li> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> </ol>  | Pan-Commonwealth with focus on most urgent member countries                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable government debt management</li> <li>• SDG17</li> </ul>   | ?  | Impact Pathway 1 (Q1, Q2)   |



| Programme/Project  | Impact Pathways  | Mandate                                  | Benefits/changes   | Coverage  | Learning value  |
|--|--|--|--|---|---|
| Development of the Secretariat's Debt Management System – Meridian (1 vote, and also suggested by the evaluators)                    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol>   | Pan-Commonwealth (CHOGM)                 | Debt management system/software Meridian   | The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, Cyprus, Mauritius, Belize, Samoa, India, Cook Islands, Barbados, Botswana, eSwatini, Maldives, Seychelles, Anguilla, The Bahamas, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Jamaica, Fiji, Anguilla, South Africa, Malawi, Lesotho | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnerships and innovation</li> <li>Collective benefit</li> <li>Remote roll-out through e-learning platform (Q1, Q3)</li> </ul>   |
| Pan-Commonwealth Natural Resources Advisory Assistance for Sustainable Development (suggested by the evaluators)                     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Policy and legislative development</li> <li>Institutional and capacity development</li> </ol>   | Individual member countries (demand-led) | Government revenue from Natural Resource revenue management, mining regulations and fiscal/tax regimes | The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Cook Islands, Ghana, Guyana, Jamaica, Kiribati, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, the Kingdom of Eswatini, and Vanuatu  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demand-led technical assistance to member countries individually or through regional groupings</li> <li>Impact Pathway 1 (Q1, Q2)</li> </ul>   |
| Pan-Commonwealth Oceans Governance and Blue Charter Initiative (3 votes, with suggestion to avoid duplication with other evaluation) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Policy and legislative development</li> <li>Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol> | Pan-Commonwealth (CHOGM)                 | Sustainable marine resource management (sustainable blue economies)                                    | 47 coastal member countries   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thematic importance for the future</li> <li>member countries driving the project (ownership and commitment)</li> <li>Synergy and strategic leveraging of unique assets and comparative advantages</li> <li>Small island states</li> <li>Impact Pathway 1 (Q1, Q2, Q3)</li> </ul> |

| Programme/Project   | Impact Pathways   | Mandate  | Benefits/changes  | Coverage     | Learning value   |
|---|---|--|---|--------------|--|
| Innovations and partnerships (suggested by the evaluators)  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol>  | Pan-Commonwealth   | Digitalisation Collective impact  |              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic leveraging of unique assets and mandate</li> <li>• Collective benefit/impact</li> <li>• Strategic evaluation and learning (Q1, Q3, Q4, Q7)</li> </ul>         |
| Small states' participation in multilateral trade negotiations in Geneva (1 vote, suggested by the reference group) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol>  | Commonwealth small states (CSS)                                | Effective and meaningful participation of small states in international trade and the multilateral trading system | Small states | Convening power (Q1, Q4)   |
| Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda (CCA) (5 votes, and also suggested by the evaluators)                              | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Institutional and capacity development</li> <li>3. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy</li> <li>4. knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol> | Pan-Commonwealth (CHOGM, Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting) | Physical, digital, regulatory and business/ Video Conferencing connectivity for sustainable employment and growth |              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demand driven by member countries</li> <li>• New delivery model through member countries linking and sharing of knowledge and practices (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q8)</li> </ul> |
| Commonwealth Trade Competitiveness Programme  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy and legislative development</li> <li>4. knowledge generation, sharing and networking</li> </ol>  | Pan-Commonwealth with focus on small states                    | Access to markets   |              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic leveraging of unique assets and mandate ('filling the gaps in technical assistance')</li> <li>• Impact Pathway 1 (Q1, Q2)</li> </ul>                          |

| 5. Small and Other Vulnerable States*   |  |         |   |                                       |   |  |
|---|--|---------|---|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Programme/Project   | Impact Pathways  | Mandate | Benefits/changes                                | Coverage                              | Learning value  |  |
| Strengthening the Resilience of Small States to achieve Sustainable Development                 | 2. Institutional and capacity development  |         | Access to concessional finance                  | Small states                          | (Q1)  |  |
| Small States Centre of Excellence   | 2. Institutional and capacity development<br>3. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking |         |   | Small states                          | (Q1)  |  |
| Co-ordinated Action to Enhance Climate Change resilience and improved access to climate finance | 2. Institutional and capacity development<br>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking |         | Access to climate finance<br>Climate resilience | Small states                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivery through climate experts embedded at the country level</li> <li>• Thematic importance for the future</li> </ul> (Q1, Q3) |  |
| Strengthening evidence-based climate action   | 2. Institutional and capacity development<br>4. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking |         | Climate resilience                              | Small island developing states (SIDS) | (Q1)  |  |

## Annex C: Primary Case Study Summaries

### Trade Competitiveness

#### Overview: The Secretariat's approach to trade competitiveness

Achieving trade competitiveness is a major challenge for Commonwealth member countries, especially the small and developing states. The Secretariat funds and resources initiatives in pursuit of its Strategic Outcome goal of 'more inclusive economic growth and sustainable development' by supporting 'effective mechanisms for increased trade, increased access to trade, employment and business growth'.

The Secretariat's Trade Competitiveness Section funds a range of key initiatives, including combinations of policy frameworks/legislation and ex-post technical support. It is a given that the Secretariat has limited human and financial resources at its disposal, and resources will only get more constrained going forward. Future decisions about maximising contribution can therefore be helped by reviewing what works best and why.

During the current strategy period, the Secretariat has built a strategic portfolio of work supporting competitiveness strengthening. The competitiveness projects selected and described below for this case study showcase this portfolio of work and illustrate the Secretariat's ways of working across its Trade Competitiveness portfolio.

The Secretariat's contribution, as illustrated in this case study, integrated in particular the following Impact Pathways (IPs):

- Knowledge generation, sharing and networking in support of cross-member country collaboration and learning (IP I)
- Technical support to policy and legislative development and to institutional capacity building (IP II-III)
- Consensus building through leadership and advocacy to advance collective priority issues (IP V)

These pathways were backed by:

- Leveraging the Secretariat's convening power and strategic partnerships to enhance Commonwealth action (IP IV)
- Effective governance and leadership utilising internal capacity and expertise

With limited funds but a strategic position, institutional credibility and access to technical expertise, the key to success for the Trade Competitiveness Section is to identify and tackle blockages with targeted support. As the trade competitiveness adviser put it:

*It's a very nuanced position: we are a trusted adviser rather than a catch-all source of support. It's like a jigsaw: you see which piece you can support with your limited resources in order to unblock/move things forward.*

#### **EAC (East African Community)-AEO (Authorised Economic Operator) regional project**

In this project case, the Secretariat sequenced support to knowledge generation research on AEO accessibility, with the design and delivery of consensus-building session around the research report's findings, followed by post hoc capacity building support to sensitise 'anticipating' small and medium-sized enterprises to the AEO programme and certification procedure. Under the trade facilitation scheme, the AEO status is an internationally recognised quality mark that shows that a company's role in the international supply chain is secure and its customs controls and procedures are efficient and compliant.

The Secretariat's project support was facilitated through the build up of its credibility and trust-based relations with stakeholders in the East Africa region. Regional stakeholders in this project process recognised the Secretariat's approach to partnership building and its strategy of not 'leading from the front'. The Secretariat was also praised for its willingness to work directly with a private organisation, the Federation of East African Freight Forwarders Associations (FEAFFA), with acquiescence of the regional economic body, the EAC Secretariat's Customs Directorate.

Stakeholders reflected that the Secretariat could improve and sustain its contribution by engaging partners on a more persistent and predictable basis and building on the long-term positive relations that had been established. They also flagged the challenge of tackling inconsistencies thrown up by regional members not all being Commonwealth member countries.

#### **Belize export diversification project**

In this project case, the Secretariat's capacity-building support to the Government of Belize's export unit was designed as a niche project of post hoc technical support to address the

'implementation gap' caused by institutional and capacity challenges facing Belize (and many other member countries) trying to implement its National Export Strategy.

The Secretariat's commitment to collaborating and strengthening institutions sustainably was enabled in this case by the somewhat unusual organisational presence in Belize of a dedicated standalone national export co-ordinating and monitoring agency.

The Secretariat's support to the export unit was backed by a flexible and open working relationship, through which the partners designed and delivered this package of technical support. Significantly, this was designed to enable the export unit to move beyond 'projectised' forms of donor funding to focus on sustainable institutional strengthening.

Key to the Secretariat's success in funding technical support was its institutional positionality, political credibility and role as a trusted adviser, working in partnership mode with no conditionalities attached.

Again, stakeholders were hopeful that this support would not be a one-off project, but would be a springboard to an ongoing partnership with the Secretariat.

### **Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) e-commerce readiness assessment project**

The Secretariat is supporting OECS and its six member countries to make informed decisions on e-commerce. Through this project, the Secretariat focused on knowledge generation, sharing and networking by funding a consultant to produce an e-commerce readiness assessment. The Trade Competitiveness Section kept a close watching brief on the readiness assessment process being conducted by a Jamaican consultancy outfit, providing ongoing communication and technical inputs.

Using its convening position, the section adopted an enabling role in this project process, convening OECS stakeholders and member country representatives to discuss the scope, objectives and the proposed activities of the assessment, with OECS in the driving seat. OECS valued the Secretariat institutionally as an 'honest broker', with soft power to network, backed by knowledge products and reputational credibility with the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), Caribbean

Development Bank (CDB) and other organisations. OECS also characterised the staff and organisational culture in the Secretariat as geared towards facilitating rather than driving or controlling, with trust-based relationships built up over many years of personal contact.

The Secretariat has indicated that it will be able to use its convening power to bring other relevant partners on board, including IADB, which has signalled future support. The Section is also planning a senior stakeholder event in late September or early October 2021, with trade and IT ministers and permanent secretaries of member countries to secure buy-in from policy-makers so that they commit to post-project policy change.

In addition, the Secretariat also recognised the value to the OECS of providing an evidence base to support their engagement in e-commerce-related trade talks at the WTO, with potential future requests for technical assistance from WTO resulting. This prompted internal Secretariat cross-unit collaboration between the International Trade Policy Section and Trade Competitiveness Section to bring together the Secretariat's integrated support to the technical and policy process elements of this project.

Reflecting on this approach of using the Secretariat's funds for regional over country-level engagement, the Secretariat's trade competitiveness adviser reflected that while it was generally much easier to influence one partner bilaterally, working with a regional partner could be more cost effective, with costs shared between countries and surprising synergies emerging.

### **Cameroon national training on investment treaties**

This project, implemented bilaterally with the Government of Cameroon, involved the Secretariat funding training on international investment treaties for national stakeholders. This initiative was part of a broader push to support member countries to develop foreign direct investment for sustainable development objectives, but that also protects national government from expensive litigation from multinational companies. The Trade Competitiveness Section had previously worked on supporting regional capacity around investment treaties, stating: 'Regional initiatives give us a bigger bang for our buck.' But the key was then to ensure ownership among regional member countries.

Through a now-familiar process in this case study, personal trust-based relationships developed between key players, in this case between Cameroon's former Director of the Ministry of Mines, Industry and Technological Development and the Secretariat's head of the Trade Competitiveness Section. An agreement was reached and approved for Secretariat support to design and deliver a national training workshop. With limited in-house capacity, the Secretariat reached out to IISD, a long-term partner and organisation with a track record in this field for training and capacity building, to deliver the training.

Crucially, the Secretariat's endorsement, backed by its reputation and trustworthiness, conferred political visibility and technical credibility to the process, as evidenced by high-level representation at the workshop from key ministries. This role was in contrast to other agencies that had in the past created tensions around the quality of their input.

Comparing regional and national approaches, IISD's lead on sustainable investment reflected that while at a regional level with small funding you could impact on several officials (especially if part of a regional integration organisation), drilling down to national processes was critically important to achieving concrete change.

## EAC (East African Community)-AEO (Authorised Economic Operator) regional initiative

### Background

The EAC-AEO programme was piloted in 2012 and rolled out nationally and regionally in 2013. Its aim is to offer easier customs clearance for exporters in the region. Under the World Customs Organization (WCO) framework of standards, an AEO status is given to a business which has secure international supply chains and complies with customs controls and procedures. Businesses with AEO status enjoy simplified customs procedures, including reduced examination and prioritised clearance when they trade transnationally.<sup>1</sup>

The current EAC target is to reach 500 regional AEO status holders. After ten years, however, only

132 firms had received AEO accreditation across the region.

While sharing FEAFFA's concern about low uptake, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the EAC Secretariat focus remains primarily on 'supply side' capacity of customs administrations to administer the AEO programme. From 2019, the Secretariat identified an opportunity to provide 'demand side' support to the expansion of AEO certification in the region among the six regional member countries, four of which are also Commonwealth member countries. It was particularly focused on expanding access for SMEs with lower capacity to navigate the system and reach compliance. The Commonwealth's head of the Trade Competitiveness Section at that time commented: 'This intervention will help to improve the trading environment in the region, which will stimulate economic growth and employment'.

The Secretariat's involvement was triggered by an approach from FEAFFA, which was concerned that take up of AEO accreditation among its members had been slow, particularly among smaller enterprises. There were stringent requirements (around security, staffing and finance) for operators to qualify, which were not clear to the SMEs, raising both expectations and frustrations.

FEAFFA heard about the Secretariat through other regional activities that it was supporting and established a rapport with one particular Secretariat individual. It then requested Secretariat support via a Secretariat window for unsolicited applications, having previously sought support from local agencies without success. FEAFFA had been working collaboratively with the EAC on regional training programmes for customs officials. The Secretariat required endorsement from a regional institution and the EAC were happy to back this proposal, recognising the need for demand-side capacity building to expand membership. As the Secretariat's trade competitiveness adviser put it:

*So we thought it was a good initiative to support to help FEAFFA to bring in more stakeholders and sensitise them and amend to make it more inclusive of SMEs.*

### The Secretariat's contribution

The Secretariat's Trade Competitiveness Section first commissioned a research paper to investigate these issues further and set out

<sup>1</sup> See The Commonwealth (2019), 'Commonwealth will support East African Community to stimulate regional trade', available at: <https://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/commonwealth-will-support-east-african-community-stimulate-regional-trade>

recommendations to increase access and uptake.<sup>2</sup> The author concluded:

*There is a conspicuous absence of MSMEs [micro, small and medium-sized enterprises] in the scheme. They lack the awareness and financial capacity to meet AEO eligibility requirements.*

FEAFFA, with Secretariat support, organised two back-to-back two-day sessions in Mombasa in late June.<sup>3</sup> The first session was a meeting of stakeholders to discuss the report findings, consider its implications and develop a roadmap. The second session was an awareness creation session on the AEO scheme with selected SMEs in the coffee sector. This session brought together a mix of individuals that were already in the programme and AEO 'anticipating members'.

One participant, working for a Kenyan coffee co-operative marketing agency, was able to reflect on the AEO scheme in general and her experience of the workshop in particular. She confirmed that the companies that already had AEO clearance were 'the really big companies with a lot of muscle'. Her (medium-sized) company got to know about the AEO sensitisation initiative through a communication from FEAFFA, which was reaching out to local producers to raise awareness around AEO. The 'demand readiness' of companies like hers was evident from her explanation of their situation:

*We currently face delays with customs loading and shipment, which means we have to factor in two days before we can actually load. This is very frustrating, especially if we want to load more than one container a day (in the March–May period particularly). The Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) has to approve our entry before the container can be cleared. This has major implications for our business model and efficiency. So, when we heard about the AEO sensitisation event we were very enthusiastic.*

From her conversations with colleagues at the workshop, she could see there was a generally high interest and willingness to invest in the process.

She confirmed the usefulness of the event: 'We got comprehensive information on the AEO navigation process and next steps, so I was quite satisfied.' The next steps in her case involved preparing her company's books for auditing, following which they would be in a position to submit their application. She suggested that a follow-up communication from FEAFFA would be very useful to keep them on the path to AEO certification.

### **Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution**

FEAFFA's experience of working with the Secretariat was generally positive. FEAFFA saw a flexibility and collaborative approach that was absent in other donors:

*Other partners come with a menu of what they can and can't fund, whereas in this case we went to the Secretariat and somehow, they found a way of accommodating our needs. So, they had an extremely open and beneficial approach.*

FEAFFA recognised that the Secretariat places its trust in partners, rather than leading from the front or trying to micromanage:

*Once you agree on what is required, they let you do their thing and get to you with feedback.*

The Secretariat's willingness to work directly with a private organisation was also recognised and praised:

*I'm not sure how many other initiatives that they have with private, non-governmental outfits. So that is a real thumbs up.*

FEAFFA colleagues also reflected on what could be done to improve the way that the Secretariat engaged. While recognising that the Secretariat was constrained by annually approved budgets, one significant thing that could be adjusted would be to engage partners on a more persistent and predictable basis. This would be rather than funding an activity, then going away and coming back again later with funds. After the first two regional meetings with the Secretariat, FEAFFA came up with an action plan that they shared with the Secretariat and which ideally would form the basis of a more institutionalised relationship, predictably supporting a sequence of activities quarter by quarter. This would be instead of coming back sometime later and saying, 'We have this much money this year. Can we fund activity B or D?' This in-out approach also involves bringing people back

<sup>2</sup> Ndungu, I (2021), Consultancy to undertake analysis of issues affecting uptake of Authorised Economic Operator Scheme by Businesses in the East African Community (EAC): Final Report, unpublished report, 29 June.

<sup>3</sup> FEAFFA and Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), Report of the Regional Meetings on the AEO Programme in East Africa, 21–24 June, unpublished report.

up to speed and then having to explain to other partners (for example, revenue authorities) about why something is or isn't happening.

A further challenge identified by FEAFFA related to inconsistencies around Commonwealth membership. In this instance, not all the EAC six member countries were also Commonwealth member countries. This was a challenge, because as a Secretariat the EAC is only supposed to work with all of its members. So, for example, the Commonwealth Secretariat might say, 'We can't spend any pounds on Burundi because they're not Commonwealth members,' so funding for Burundi Private Sector Organisations (PSOs) participation would have to be provided by themselves or another funder. During the pandemic, however, Burundi PSOs were in any case able to join at virtually no cost.

EAC stakeholders were also appreciative of the Secretariat's support and worked closely with FEAFFA to agree on where they could add value with that support. EAC provided two trainers for the event, with FEAFFA as host. After the event, their overall assessment of the sensitisation training session was that it did not sufficiently absorb and then respond to the recommendations in the research paper and did not sufficiently focus on SME participation and inclusion. Participation was also modest, with just 15 participants. EAC colleagues also reflected on the need for investment in awareness-raising outreach activities prior to sensitisation. EAC's conclusion was that while the Secretariat's support was timely, there needed to be a plan to agree the way forward to sustain and extend impact, built on long-term relations. Without this, it might be seen as a missed opportunity.

### **Belize export diversification project: Building the capacity of BELTRAIDE export unit to implement activities under the National Export Strategy (NES)**

#### **Background**

The Secretariat's involvement with improving Belize's export competitiveness has been a long-term engagement. Some four or five years ago, the Secretariat was supporting the Government of Belize on legislative reform in order to progress its WTO status. At the same time, there was also a national export strategy process which the Secretariat was on the fringes of.

In the build up to this project, the Government of Belize (GoB) was ready to implement its second National Export Strategy (NES). A key priority was to focus on enhancing the country's export performance and reducing the cost of doing business, alongside improvements in revenue collection and financial sector reform.

The Secretariat's support to the GoB was conceived as a niche project to support an 'implementation gap' caused by institutional and capacity challenges facing many member countries trying to implement their country national export strategies. The Secretariat has observed that in the absence of effective implementation, these strategies tend to get 'projectised', with projects then ending up 'on the shelf' due to lack of capacities and resources. The Secretariat trade adviser on the project reflected: 'So, knowing this challenge I wanted to go the next step.'

The GoB's export agency, BELTRAIDE, as the national agency mandated to drive investment, export competitiveness and enterprise development, has a key role to play in NES design and implementation. As a standalone dedicated co-ordinating and monitoring agency, BELTRAIDE is also highly unusual in the region and in this case, provided the organisational entry point for Secretariat support. Changes in personnel and the emergence of new areas of activity for BELTRAIDE officers meant that capacity gaps emerged to take these forward

#### **The Secretariat's contribution**

The Secretariat's support was designed and delivered through a very small (£30,000) discretionary-funded project, strategically targeted to unblock the implementation of the NES.

The BELTRAIDE unit manager explained that communications had always been open with the Secretariat. The Secretariat Trade Competitiveness Section had reached out and explained that it was looking to offer additional support to facilitate the implementation of the National Export Strategy. BELTRAIDE then provided a proposal with a menu and the Secretariat identified one activity that fell in line with its priorities.

The project was designed as a package of technical support to the BELTRAIDE export unit to enable it to move beyond projectised approaches to delivering a better service to national exporting agencies, especially those that were 'on the edges' but not quite there yet.



Under the project, a comprehensive training module was designed and delivered virtually amid the challenges of the pandemic. A five-day 'training of trainers' workshop was conducted in February 2021, with the aim 'to provide (BELTRAIDE Export Unit) officers with the tools to help MSMEs to improve productivity and train these businesses on how to enter the EU/UK market and CARICOM Market'.

BELTRAIDE works directly with the private sector. The project's training consultant focused on BELTRAIDE's advisory role, so it was not strictly ToT (although the trainer element would be important sometime in the future). The export unit was small (five people) but the training brought together personnel from across the organisation, which included colleagues from the investment unit and small business unit. BELTRAIDE also took the opportunity to update some of the informational tools that it used with private sector exporters.

Outputs from the workshop included an action plan for the participants to see a way forward, streamlined to each officer's specific needs.<sup>4</sup> Accountability was tied in with results tracking through business feedback.

The ToT course was well received by participants, as evidenced by a course evaluation questionnaire. For the next steps as part of the action plan developed during the course, BELTRAIDE provided a short list of MSMEs to participate in its post-ToT development programme. It was expected that at least 20 MSMEs would be targeted for support. At the time of writing, it was still early days since the training course, but already one BELTRAIDE adviser had been able to assist a small company to export butterfly pupa. This happened right after the training and drew directly on knowledge gained in the market assessment, with the pupa company using the training exercise tool.

The Secretariat's plan was to support a follow-up to the training course, revisiting BELTRAIDE to discuss the process of delivery and measure the uptake by MSMEs on progressing business development.

### **Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution**

Reflecting on the Secretariat's contribution and added value, its trade adviser flagged the

political positionality of the Secretariat as a trusted counterpart and adviser as being key to its effectiveness working in partnership mode with no conditionalities attached.

She reflected that working within a development framework (focusing on vulnerabilities) her division could give niche targeted data and analysis on what partners needed to look out for in trade negotiations:

*It's a very nuanced position where you are a trusted adviser rather than a catch-all source of support. It's like a jigsaw: you see which piece you can support with your limited resources in order to unblock/move things forward.*

The trade adviser was keenly aware of the delicate nature of this role and approach to support. As a very small agency with a small budget, the Secretariat was always at risk of being derailed in its support process by the entry of larger donors or agencies with bigger project budgets.

BELTRAIDE's export unit manager was also able to reflect on the Secretariat's support and added value. BELTRAIDE's previous engagement with the Secretariat had provided her with a longer-term perspective on this relationship and contribution. Fundamentally, the Secretariat had an institutional position and credibility that comparable donors lacked. The Secretariat's approach to support tended to be more flexible and personal than that of comparable agencies; it was more relationship-based than transactional. She reflected that the unit's initial meeting with the Secretariat Trade Adviser was:

*... not purely technical (but) provided space to express things and throw out some ideas, in contrast to other partners who try to control these meetings.*

Down the line, it was relatively easy also to switch the mode of delivery from face-to-face to virtual, given the pandemic:

*We were able to jump on a call and pivot the training. We've had other contractual relationships (with other agencies) that didn't work so smoothly!*

She further noted the administrative simplicity of the Secretariat's procedures. It was relatively quick and easy to get to the point of identifying details and starting implementation.

BELTRAIDE's export unit manager hoped that this project did not represent a one-off moment of support, but rather was a springboard to future

<sup>4</sup> This is included in the consultant's report. See Portocarrero, E (2021), Summary Final Report: Training of Trainers 'Export Growth and Diversification', unpublished report.

partnerships with the Secretariat. As part of this ongoing relationship, she would have liked to see a component of understudying/ on-the-job mentoring; this had originally been conceived for capacity building, but had to be sacrificed due to the shift to it being a virtual event.

## Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) e-commerce readiness assessment project

### Background

Eastern Caribbean member countries are presently not benefiting from the growth (actual and potential) of e-commerce in the region. The Secretariat recognised a need to invest strategically and proactively in the 'foundational elements' of their digital economy *'to ensure that their businesses and citizens can keep pace with and thrive in an increasingly digital world'*.<sup>5</sup>

In January 2020, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) requested technical assistance from the Secretariat to conduct an e-readiness assessment for its protocol member countries,<sup>6</sup> as the first phase in the development of an OECS-wide e-commerce strategy. This assessment would map and identify existing e-commerce infrastructure and regulatory gaps *'that are potential impediments to the growth of digital trade and access to markets'*. The e-commerce readiness assessment was designed to be broad in scope, covering: citizen and business readiness for e-commerce; information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and accessibility, logistics and delivery; policy and regulations, and financial and banking ecosystems.

In addition to this mapping element, the Secretariat also recognised the value to the OECS of providing an evidence base to support its engagement in trade talks at the WTO, with potential future requests for technical WTO assistance resulting.

### The Secretariat's contribution

The Secretariat's contribution was centred on a close ongoing partnership with OECS. The OECS trade senior technical specialist (based in the Permanent Delegation of the OECS in Geneva) explained OECS' motivation to build an evidence base that it could take to the WTO, in order to be 'taken seriously at multilateral negotiation level'. He then described reaching out to the Secretariat informally at first 'to test the water':

*We had been working on this for the past two years. We made an approach informally through the Geneva Office, they reached out to London then back to Geneva.*

The Secretariat's trade competitiveness adviser explained that after this initial approach from OECS, he first carried out a landscape assessment to look at stakeholder involvement and ensure complementarity, quickly seeing that the World Bank was doing capacity building in e-commerce<sup>7</sup> (although unfortunately, the World Bank colleague was not available to provide inputs into the project design):

*So, we consciously showed our distinct added value and flagged this to OECS (who were also working with the Bank on this), then we wrote a concept note that complemented the Bank's work.*

The Secretariat team then organised a virtual scoping mission in October 2020, which brought together OECS stakeholders and member countries representatives to discuss the scope, objectives and the proposed activities of the assessment. This virtual mission also provided an opportunity for the Secretariat team to test its assumptions regarding the current situation, challenges and opportunities in the region regarding e-commerce and digital trade.

Following the scoping workshop, OECS was in a position to formalise the evolving agreements around next steps by developing a concept note that was signed off by the OECS head to DSG of the Secretariat. This in turn prompted internal cross-unit collaboration between the International Trade Policy Section and Trade Competitiveness Section to bring together the Secretariat's integrated

<sup>5</sup> The Secretariat (no date), 'Trade Competitiveness Section Project Information Note: Technical Assistance to assess Digital Trade and e-Commerce in 6 member countries of OECS', Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

<sup>6</sup> The protocol member countries are the founding members of the OECS and enjoy full membership. These countries are Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines.

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank Caribbean Digital Transformation Project for four Eastern Caribbean countries: Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines.

support to the technical and policy process elements of this project.

The Secretariat contracted and worked closely with a Jamaica-based consultant to design and deliver the e-commerce readiness assessment. At the time of this evaluation, the OECS had received a signal that the Secretariat would continue to be involved subject to availability of resources. The Secretariat also indicated that it would be able to use its convening power to bring other relevant partners on board, including IADB – which had signalled future support.

### **Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution**

Reflecting on its role and added value, the Secretariat's Trade Competitiveness Section adviser stressed his approach to partnering as an enabling process: *'We wanted OECS to lead this process – we wanted to take a back seat.'*

Meanwhile, the Secretariat was continuing to exert its political convening role as part of the longer-term process of promoting e-commerce in the region. To this end, the adviser was planning a senior stakeholder event in late September/early October 2021 with trade and IT ministers and permanent secretaries of these two ministries of the member countries to secure buy-in from policy-makers, so that they would commit to post-project policy change.

The Secretariat's trade adviser stressed that this was not a new approach, but rather built on a track record of consciously taking a strategic convening 'process approach' to project support. Recent examples included his work convening a high-level discussion on Brexit policy impacts on African, Caribbean and Pacific exporters.<sup>8</sup> He reflected:

*Our projects are not like World Bank/DFID multi-million, multi-year projects. They are small, discrete pieces of assistance around which we leverage high-level political buy-in.*

The Secretariat's trade adviser also emphasised the importance of working internally across units to support OECS ambition to use the readiness assessment as an evidence base to take to WTO

level and to be taken seriously at the multilateral negotiation level. Again, this was not a new approach but built on a track record of internal cross-unit collaboration.<sup>9</sup> In this case, he explained the importance of internal collaboration between the Competitiveness and Trade Policy Sections to tie in enhanced competitiveness with ongoing policy processes, in particular the latter's role in dealing with WTO trade negotiations. This extended to trade policy colleague inputs to ensure that the Jamaican consultants were focusing sufficiently on the trade negotiation implications in their e-readiness assessment report: *So there's a strategic linking of micro to macroeconomics of e-commerce.*

The Jamaican consultant contracted to write the e-readiness assessment, confirmed this Secretariat approach of encouraging OECS to lead the technical and process aspects of writing the report and building stakeholder ownership. He recalled that the OECS trade senior technical specialist was at every (virtual) meeting and led on embedding the technical work in a stakeholder process, encouraged by the Secretariat. Hence OECS organised a high-level stakeholder meeting online with some 70 participants, including senior OECS stakeholders from each member country. Additionally, OECS organised a focus group session to validate and discuss the consultant's survey findings.

This did not mean that the Secretariat retreated into client mode. The consultant explained that the Secretariat's trade adviser was an active participant in the OECS-organised stakeholder process, while remaining directly involved in the technical writing process, meeting online fortnightly for updates and PowerPoint sharing:

*He was (also) able to flex the deadline, so we could get the front end lined up. He wasn't just ticking boxes, he understood the nature of the project. His editors (also) helped us to finish the last 10 per cent.*

The Secretariat trade competitiveness adviser reflected further on the approach of using Secretariat funds for regional over country-level

<sup>8</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), Agenda: Joint THE SECRETARIAT-OACPS Webinar on Post-Brexit Trade Facilitation Studies, 18 May, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

<sup>9</sup> This has included recent collaboration with EYSD on the mapping of Secretariat projects' contributions to the SDGs and on a concept note for a project on Satellite Technology Application of Commonwealth Countries (emails provided as evidence).

engagement. While it was generally much easier to influence one partner bilaterally, he argued that working with a regional partner could be more cost effective, with costs shared between countries and surprising synergies emerging: *'You get higher levels of similarity than they are willing to admit!'* Indeed, at the start of this process the six countries were sceptical about a regional approach, *'but as we moved along they gradually realised that it was a better approach to do a regional study'*.

The OECS trade senior technical specialist interviewed for this case study confirmed the strategic process-focused added value that the Secretariat brought to this somewhat crowded space. He explained that OECS did the technical 'heavy lifting' between senior officials in member countries. When it came to implementation, however, 'we recognise the need for high-level political endorsement':

*So, we've factored this into our work, for example, around legislation drafting, policy development around international standards. Our work on this project contemplates this. Through the Good Offices of the Commonwealth Secretary-General we plan to bring high level policy-makers together, with involvement of our DG as well. Hopefully in September.*

He was only too aware of the Secretariat's relative lack of resources, but highly valued the Secretariat institutionally as an 'honest broker' with soft power to network, backed by knowledge products and reputational credibility with IADB, CDB and other organisations:

*The Secretariat's greatest value is access (allied to) a very constructive (and less bureaucratic) way of working.*

He contrasted the Secretariat's approach with frustrated efforts to get support from another development partner:

*This was tedious just to get them to sit down. Then their approach was a disincentive for us because they required us to find the resources in order for them to be the implementing partner. (In the end) we couldn't justify the expense for our member states. When we approached the Secretariat, there was an immediate positive response. Ownership was encouraged rather than being driven by the Secretariat. This was a difference in approach which was very useful.*

He stressed that this approach was not just limited to this particular project: other requests to the Secretariat have met with a favourable response.

He identified a key part of this approach as being a staff and organisational culture in the Secretariat that was geared towards facilitating rather than driving or controlling. There was also a quick lead in. Capacity building activities started quickly (in Saint Lucia). The Secretariat then provided resources to being experts together. OECS and Secretariat colleagues recognised that this needed to be a long-term and embedded effort, in contrast to other agencies where a workshop might almost be the output:

*So they walked through the workshop process with us, with tacit understanding that there would be follow-up. We had an understanding that we had a partner that would be 'walking with us'.*

Critically, this relationship was built on trust and good working relations, built up over many years of personal contact with Secretariat colleagues.

Stakeholders finally reflected on improvements to the Secretariat's approach to increase its strategic and partnership contribution even further in the future. These reflections centred on the need to ensure inclusiveness in project procurement (high thresholds could exclude smaller firms) and flexible administration in the face of tight project timeframes ('Maybe this hasn't caught up with the flexible approach I described earlier').

## Cameroon national training on investment treaties

### Background

The Secretariat's adviser and head of the Trade Competitiveness Section confirmed the crucial importance of updating international investment treaties in ways that redress historical imbalances. She referenced a history of Commonwealth member countries being given an investment strategy model/template, *'and then just signing it'*. She pointed to current cases being brought against national governments by investors amounting to billions of dollars in dispute settlement cases:

*The truth is that we do need FDI [foreign direct investment] but this needs to be both for our sustainable development objectives and to protect us against litigation.*

Her section had previously worked on supporting regional capacity around investment treaties: *'Regional initiatives give us a bigger bang for our buck.'* The key then was to ensure ownership among regional member countries.<sup>10</sup>

This Cameroon national training on investment strategies case is a single country case. Cameroon has recently discovered oil, with potential for FDI. So, the challenge is to ensure that when the Government of Cameroon (GoC) negotiates with contractors, it has the skills to look out for and incorporate Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) for investors, along with environmental protections and sustainable development/ community compensation. This amounts to the need to 'balance the interests of the country and the investors'.

### **The Secretariat's contribution**

Cameroon's former director of the Ministry of Mines, Industry and Technological Development (MINMIDT) explained that he met with Secretariat colleagues for first time in Nairobi during the 11<sup>th</sup> Forum of Investment Negotiators in February 2018, jointly organised by the Secretariat and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). The training was very interesting. Investment negotiators from all over the globe came together to discuss investment challenges and how to avoid traps. He discussed with the Secretariat's head of the Trade Competitiveness Section his wish to organise a similar training in Cameroon. She was positive about it. At the same time, they also discussed with IISD if they could work together to organise a workshop. Later, they had another session in Colombia in 2019 and discussed the

potential collaboration further. When he reported back to his ministry, it was also very positive: *'We then wrote officially to the Secretariat requesting this support, via MINEX. The Secretariat responded positively, along with IISD.'*

The process was frustrated and delayed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, in 2020 the Secretariat and IISD contacted Cameroon colleagues and proposed two sessions to organise the workshop, with a first taster session online and a second more detailed session on site when travel restrictions were lifted.

The Trade Competitiveness Section team collaborated with its long-term partner and organisation with a track record in international investment agreements to deliver the training. This is an example of working with partners to ensure projects are delivered to a high technical standard and also at a reduced cost, as resources deployed towards the project are shared by both partners.

### **Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution**

Cameroon's former director of the Ministry of Mines, Industry and Technological Development (MINMIDT), reflecting on the Secretariat's contribution, highlighted the Commonwealth's reputation and credibility, which helped him to convince his ministry to pull this together. MINMIDT had a previous track record with the Secretariat, but also had to work with the Ministry for External relations. Nonetheless all went smoothly.

The Secretariat's credibility was confirmed and illustrated by the high-level GoC buy-in to the workshop. Two ministers were represented at the highest level by their secretary-generals at the opening of the workshop, along with other directors.

He also underlined the Secretariat's reputation for reliability and quality, compared to other agencies/ donors: the Secretariat had previously organised many activities with different ministries (including governance and institutional capacity building initiatives) and hardly any controversies had emerged with the Secretariat. In contrast, other organisations had created tensions around the quality of their input. The procedure was also less bureaucratic than those of other agencies. Interpersonal contact was key: *'So they (the Secretariat) have a good reputation, good faith and have built up trust.'*

<sup>10</sup> The Secretariat had previously, for instance, supported a regional CARICOM initiative with 12 countries, involving the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and IISD. In that case, it co-funded the initiative, bringing UNCTAD on board to pay for meeting room costs etc., while it paid for consultancy inputs. This enabled her to bring in all the regional Commonwealth member countries. Similarly, the Secretariat supported the Caribbean Association of Investment Promotion Agencies (CAIPA) in 2018 on a regional initiative with 12 Caribbean member countries. They drilled down to the process of starting a business, asking what were the bottlenecks. The Secretariat then supported each of the 12 member countries to develop action plans, with a menu of actions, using the template of the (more advanced) Jamaica Action Plan. The Caribbean Development Bank then picked up on these action plans to take forward specific actions and attract investment. It was willing to fund some of the country activities on the action plan menus.

The workshop was held just two weeks prior to the interviews for this case study, so it was too early to assess outcomes. That said, participants were positive and looking forward to the second session in the coming weeks.

The former director concluded that it would be useful to have more detail on how the Secretariat operated and how to initiate collaboration. It could be difficult to navigate these windows of opportunity for collaboration. In this case, collaboration was very much based on personal relationships.

IISD's lead on sustainable investment, who led the training workshop, was also able to comment on the Secretariat's contribution and added value. This was the first national-level training event that IISD had partnered with the Secretariat on and it was also the first time they had organised this as a hybrid (virtual and in-person) event:

*We at IISD have never done an in-person event like this in Cameroon – so it was very important to have the Secretariat's support make contact with the GoC [as well as] to find a facilitator, translator. They know the country and have worked there before.*

As the process started before the pandemic and was then delayed, it was even more important to have the Secretariat's stamp of endorsement to retain credibility and government approval/ buy-in for this workshop:

*We got a very high level of representation from the GoC, which reflected on the Secretariat's profile and credibility, and this high level of buy-in and interest endured (through the pandemic). This will in turn make a big difference in terms of future outcomes and next steps.*

She further reflected positively on several years of collaboration, especially through the IISD Annual Forum for International Investors, an annual event held across different continents with a different national host each year.

The IISD lead observed that the Secretariat remained 'a great partner' in organisation and funding, at least in terms of member country

participation (a big part of the budget for this platform). The Secretariat was also very supportive in the regional support forum, with its head of trade competitiveness on the steering committee to identify speakers and participants and to speak herself at events: 'So it's more than logistical – it's helping to frame the event and the agenda.'

Furthermore, having the Secretariat as a partner – alongside the African Union and others – also added credibility to the event: 'This mix of Secretariat support on funding, programme and substantive side is unique.'

Comparing regional and national approaches, she reflected that at the regional level with small funding, you could impact on several officials – especially if part of a regional integration organisation. IISD had done this in the past with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), SADC etc., with a huge impact, especially if they had a mandate to deliver on this: 'So we continue to work at that level, especially in Africa where they have so many regional processes.' The downside of a regional approach was that training outputs when shifted down to the national level could 'stay as nice documents that don't get actioned'.

This was why IISD was also trying to drill down to national processes. In order for awareness raising and buying in to lead to concrete change, you needed to do something at the national level. This involved 'putting officials from different ministries in the room together and they realise that they need to co-ordinate on this issue'. In this way, their approach could be highly impactful at the national level when dealing at the same time with a political process as well as a technical input: 'It's time consuming and not easy to go to every country and do this. So, if you have the possibility then you should do this.'

She concluded that as part of this shift from the regional to the national level (or vice versa), the Secretariat's head of trade competitiveness had the personal contacts and capital to engineer this process, in somewhat stark contrast to more distant and bureaucratic partners.

Going forward, the Secretariat will remain influential at the regional level, as seen through its convening power and influence on the IISD Annual Forum, supporting and ensuring the right people are at the table and able to participate: 'It's these people when they are back home at the regional or national level who can make the connection.'

At the national level, IISD had the experience and expertise; however, the issue became having the funding to go to every country with a small team:

*So, it's about ensuring complementarity and the Secretariat contributing and hiring extra people to support us. This kind of support can help us in key Commonwealth member states. At IISD, we*

*have that experience and having the Secretariat's political support, soft power and ministerial entrée opens doors to get the right people to listen and buy-in.*

## Full Cycle Electoral Support

### Background

Credible, transparent and inclusive elections conducted according to international standards have become an important indicator of a country's commitment to democracy. There is now a common understanding of what constitutes a genuine and credible election. Despite a positive trajectory in the conduct and management of elections for several Commonwealth member countries, technical, political and legal/constitutional challenges persist.

In addition, emerging global trends/issues pose new challenges to electoral processes, such as those relating to campaign and political party financing, the role of social media, and the use of technologies in elections. Member countries' responses to these require ongoing and close scrutiny and support to ensure they remain in line with international best practice.

The 'full cycle electoral support' programme aims to promote and strengthen member countries' electoral processes. The Secretariat now seeks to support electoral stakeholders in each phase of the electoral process through a combination of the following engagements and activities:

- the deployment of election observation missions to lend credence to the process and to compile targeted stakeholder recommendations;
- the provision of technical assistance to strengthen the capacity of key electoral stakeholders, and other national electoral stakeholders involved in the electoral process;
- the promotion of electoral good practice and facilitation of peer-to-peer learning through the production of knowledge products; and
- the enhanced capacity of electoral officers through the provision of training workshops.

This 'full cycle' approach also addresses the political dynamics of an election through integrated political initiatives, including through

the Secretary-General's Good Offices for Peace in the pre-election period, election period and post-election period.

### The Secretariat's contribution

For more than 40 years, the Secretariat has been working on the 'core business' area of electoral support (mainly through observation missions and its Good Offices) to enable member countries to deliver more credible and inclusive elections. The Commonwealth's electoral support programme, a 'brand strength', is integral to the Secretariat's work in advancing democracy in member countries.

In the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21, the programme expanded to a 'full cycle' approach, based on the 'Revised Guidelines for the Conduct of Election Observation in Member Countries',<sup>11</sup> which was adopted at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London in 2018. The 'full cycle' approach also provides on demand pre- and post-election technical assistance, conflict prevention and other support during elections, in addition to the observation missions and the Good Offices. Peer-to-peer learning and support, knowledge sharing about emerging lessons and global challenges, and exchange of good practices among member countries' election management bodies is facilitated by the Commonwealth Electoral Network (CEN). Publications, such as *Political Finance Regulation: A Best Practice Guide to Commonwealth Legislative Approaches* (2020), help to raise awareness around emerging global issues in the field of electoral reform and help member countries to address these.

The Electoral Support Section, under the Secretariat's Governance and Peace Directorate (GPD), has developed an explicit Theory of Change around 'full cycle' electoral support, which assumes that electoral reform for more credible and inclusive elections requires strong political and institutional commitment and assistance and support from the Secretariat before, during and after the election (utilising a variety of different methods of engagement, such as technical assistance, training workshops and peer-to-peer learning, and the production of knowledge products). As showcased in the examples reviewed in this case study, the

<sup>11</sup> Available at: <https://www.chogm2018.org.uk/sites/default/files/CommonwealthGuidelinesfortheConductofElectionObservationinMemberCountries%20pdf.pdf>

Secretariat's contribution integrates the following Impact Pathways (IPs):

- Knowledge generation, sharing and networking in support of cross-member country collaboration, peer-to-peer support and learning about good practice among electoral management bodies and other stakeholders involved in electoral processes (IP I)
- Technical support to policy and legislative development and to institutional capacity building for electoral reform, tailored to the member countries' contexts and needs identified in the observation missions (IPs II and III)
- Consensus building through leadership and advocacy in 'policy forums' to reach consensus and commitment among election management bodies around priority legislative and constitutional reforms (IP V)

The Secretariat's Electoral Support Section acts as a trusted partner to the member countries, drawing on its political and institutional credibility, its relationship-based partnership convening power and its in-house technical expertise and know-how.

### Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution

The Secretariat's electoral support staff reflected on some important challenges in implementing the 'full cycle' electoral approach, linking election observation, technical assistance for electoral reform and cross-member country peer-to-peer support among election management. One challenge concerned the fact that it was entirely demand driven, which gave the Secretariat little control over who to assist, when and how often, making its contributions ad hoc and fragmented.

Another important challenge related to the significant human and financial resource constraints that the team was facing, which limited its ability to systematically follow up and achieve profound and sustained change. Although elections had the largest budget (£355,000 per year), this was small compared to what the real costs. For instance, in Pakistan and Zimbabwe, the Secretariat had to engage a security firm to address urgent security issues, for which the total cost of each of the missions was in excess of £300,000. Awaiting approval of the new strategy and action plan

(delayed due to COVID-19), a budget extension of £30,000 was granted for the three-month extension period of July to September 2021. This figure was based upon the Electoral Support Section's (EES) expenditures during the previous year, during which expenditures were lower than normal on account of the pandemic. Estimated costs for the upcoming elections in Zambia in 2021, however, were £390,000 (£300,000 for observation mission, £60,000 for high-level conflict prevention, and £30,000 for grassroots-level conflict prevention and prevention of extremism), which the ESS could not afford with the actual budget of £80k if it were not to receive an extension of its extra-budgetary resources (EBR) from the UK. Funds for this mission came from a new Democracy Designated Fund, which consists of savings and underspends identified across the Secretariat. While the Electoral Support Section was grateful for these funds, as they would allow the Zambia engagements to proceed, concerns were expressed regarding the inability to plan effectively when funds were distributed and accessed in an opaque and unpredictable manner.

Historically, the Electoral Support Section has been able to secure EBR from the UK, which amounted to £1.8 million between 2018 and 2020. However, by the end of 2020, it appeared more than 90 per cent had been spent on observation. In meetings with ESS, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) expressed concern that spending had been too much focused on observation, at the expense of other more longer-term and sustainable impact-focused engagements, which (combined with domestic politics) led to the UK's decision to not extend its EBR support. Nonetheless, the FCDO's feedback appeared to be well aligned with ESS's own vision for a 'full electoral cycle' approach. This approach, however, would present an important trade-off if resources are to further decline or stabilise – for example, turning down invitations to observe democratic elections and transferring this role to strategic partners.

Both internal and external stakeholders interviewed in the electoral support case study furthermore raised the issue of inflexible and non-transparent budgeting processes, and lengthy bureaucratic budget approval procedures, creating high levels of uncertainty and delay in processes that often required immediate action. The size of the budgets needing approval (between £10 and £20,000) did



not outweigh the level of time and effort. Partners complained that this made it difficult to collaborate with the Secretariat. Staff raised the issue of budget non-transparency and uncertainty in transitioning to the new strategy.

COVID-19 has posed a major challenge to the team's delivery through observation missions and on the ground presence. Staff reflected that its ways of working might need significant adjustment in the post-COVID-19 era.

Despite these challenges, the team managed to have a significant and highly regarded positive influence on electoral reform and election processes. This was largely due to its strategic and political positioning, its longstanding trust-based relations with stakeholders in member countries, and its role as a thought leader on new and emerging global issues in the field of electoral reform. The case study examples presented below illustrate this.

#### **Cameroon 'full cycle' electoral support**

In 2020–2021, the Secretariat provided training support to Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) on the electoral system and legal framework, voter registration, and gender mainstreaming. This was entirely demand-driven and co-funded by the Government of Cameroon, showing real political will.

The support involved a series of training workshops, including training of trainers (ToT) of senior officials and Senior Management, combining virtual and real-time facilitation, with support from a Canadian consultant, and training of regional staff provided offline by trained ELECAM officials.

ELECAM officials found the support provided by the Secretariat's Electoral Support Section to be most useful, necessary and responsive to their needs. An important outcome of the training was a proposal for policy reform to enable electoral staff to better perform and to also enable civil society and media engagement. Moreover, participation in the Commonwealth Electoral Network enabled ELECAM officials to learn from experiences in other Commonwealth countries. ELECAM has focal points for participation in different networks, including the UN and Francophonie, but found the Commonwealth Electoral Network to be most useful.

Key to the Secretariat's success was its institutional positionality and technical credibility, its flexibility to adapt its hybrid delivery model to the needs of

the participants and, above all, its longstanding trust-based relationship with the country.

This had been built up over the years through sustained engagement in accelerating democratic reforms, which had also contributed to the establishment of ELECAM as the first independent election management body in the country. This demonstrates impact that goes far beyond the successful delivery of a national capacity building effort.

#### **Solomon Islands 'full cycle' electoral support**

Another example is the full cycle electoral support provided to Solomon Islands, which started in 2001 when the country was grappling with a period of civil unrest. During the most recent election cycle (2014–2019), a process of electoral reform was initiated and a new Electoral Act was passed.<sup>12</sup>

The Solomon Islands Election Commission (SIEC) has been consistently responsive to recommendations from observation missions, which demonstrates the impact of the Secretariat's 'full cycle' electoral support. For example: the SIEC's statutory and regulatory framework was reviewed to enhance its capacity to fully exercise its oversight functions in accordance with international standards; penalties provided for under the National Parliament Electoral Provisions Act were enhanced to more effectively deter corrupt practices; procedures were established for pre-poll voting and voter registration; and training for journalists was provided to increase public confidence in the accuracy and integrity of the media's coverage of future elections.

The electoral reforms helped to improve the conduct of the general election in April 2019. Furthermore, several other engagements have grown out of the electoral support to Solomon Islands, including: SIEC's participation in the development of a *Commonwealth Good Practice Guide* on election cybersecurity, and its hosting of the Commonwealth Electoral Professionals (CEP) regional meeting.

Senior officials of ELECAM (Cameroon) and SIEC (Solomon Islands) were unequivocally and extremely positive about the full cycle electoral support provided to them by the Secretariat. Central to this support were the Secretariat's technical expertise,

<sup>12</sup> See also: Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), *Evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Support to Small States*, draft report, Triple Line/Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

political credibility and sustained engagement in accelerating electoral reforms.

### Malawi 'full cycle' electoral and conflict prevention support

In response to the political tensions that followed the disputed 2019 tripartite general elections in Malawi, the Secretariat partnered with the Malawi National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) to deliver integrated electoral and conflict prevention assistance. The institutional capacities of the National and Districts Multi-Party Liaison Committees were strengthened on alternative dispute resolution and peace messaging towards defusing political tension. Following the nullification of the elections and ordering of fresh presidential elections by the courts, the Secretariat supported home-grown and integrated domestic election observation, early warning and political dialogue technical assistance.

Additionally, in the lead up to the May 2019 tripartite elections, the Secretariat provided political leadership and conflict sensitivity capacity development technical assistance for women in Malawian politics, in partnership with domestic civil society organisations and the Ministry of Gender. Following the conclusion of the elections and emergence of more female parliamentarians, a national post-election reflection workshop was organised with the support of the Secretariat.

In continuation of the 'full cycle' electoral approach, the Secretariat supported the establishment of Malawi Inter-Party Gender Action Group (IGAG) as a multi-partisan political consensus-building platform for women in politics. During the presidential elections in June 2020, the Secretariat supported the women-led early warning and election observation initiative. Currently, the Secretariat is supporting Malawi through the 50:50 Campaign Agency on strategy advocacy and engagements towards an inclusive and gender-responsive electoral reform process (which is ongoing).

## Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda

### Background

At the 2018 CHOGM, Heads, reaffirming the role the Commonwealth can play in supporting global growth, creating employment, the sharing of best practices and promoting development, adopted the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda (CCA) for Trade and Investment to grow intra-

Commonwealth trade to US\$2 trillion by 2030. Heads directed that the CCA be pragmatic and practical, take into account regional integration initiatives, the needs of small and vulnerable economies and LDCs; add value, avoid duplication, and adopt a progressive approach towards a long-term vision for closer trade and investment ties. Per the CCA Declaration, the CCA will work on five areas:

- **physical connectivity:** infrastructure development, including multisectoral connectivity and the sharing of trade information, in order to reduce the physical barriers to trade;
- **digital connectivity:** assisting member countries in expanding ICT capabilities, identifying areas for developing their national digital economies, improving their regulatory framework and building digital infrastructure, inter alia through capacity building and promoting investments, to enable all members to take advantage of the opportunities presented by digital trade;
- **regulatory connectivity:** improving understanding of various regulatory regimes, increasing the ease of doing business, promoting good regulatory practice, including regulatory co-operation among member countries to reduce non-tariff barriers, in order to reduce regulatory barriers, addressing the capacity deficit and improving the regulatory environment for business, especially micro, small and medium enterprises, and consumers;
- **business-to-business connectivity:** supporting dialogue between the public and private sectors and between businesses, particularly with the aim of enhancing the private sector's role in promoting the blue and green economies; and
- **supply-side connectivity:** encouraging the participation of all members in global value chains.

The first iteration of this project in FY [financial year] 2017/18 supported member countries to arrive at consensus on a mechanism to deepen intra-Commonwealth trade and investment. From FY 2018/19, this project has been redesigned to support members to implement the CHOGM mandate.

## The Secretariat's contribution

In March 2017, the Secretariat convened trade ministers at a roundtable in which senior officials were tasked with developing options to deepen Commonwealth trade and investment.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, the Secretariat convened the Working Group on Trade and Investment (WGTI) in September 2017, in which the options were presented and discussed, and a formal decision was made by consensus to adopt the cluster approach.<sup>14</sup>

The Secretariat provided the necessary background papers for these meetings, facilitated the consensus building and produced the reports. At the CHOGM in 2018, member country Heads formally endorsed and launched the CCA Declaration, prepared by the Secretariat based on the outcomes of the Trade Ministers Roundtable and the WGTI.

The CCA supports member countries to develop the necessary intergovernmental architecture to build enabling trade and industry ecosystems. Attention is largely on the implications of digitalisation for infrastructure, ICT, trade legislation and regulation, private public partnerships, and agricultural supply chain linking. Its contribution to impact is its influence on member countries' policies and technical capacities to ensure that member countries' private sector actors can engage in global trade.

The CCA has an implicit programme Theory of Change (ToC) that draws on the assumption that member countries (in particular, small and other vulnerable states) can be empowered to bridge the digital divide and to create the enabling regulatory and policy environment for engaging in global trade by:

- Iteratively building consensus among participating member countries through 'convening' leaders and officials and private stakeholder partners at the various levels (IPs IV and V)
- Facilitating informed collaborative action planning with stakeholders through knowledge generation, sharing and networking or 'equipping' of multistakeholder platforms (IP I)
- Providing tailored technical support and strengthening institutional capacities of the participating member countries through 'advising' (IPs II-III)

The Secretariat's CCA team strategically positions itself to 'convene', 'equip' and 'advise' the member countries on the various aspects of trade connectivity, drawing on its institutional credibility and technical know-how.

The CCA takes a 'full member country feedback cycle' approach to address the challenge of making CHOGM and Apex consensus and decisions feed into programming with national decision-makers. Multistakeholder platforms are organised around five Connectivity Clusters (digital, physical, regulatory, supply side, business-to-business [B2B] connectivity), with participants engaging from across the Commonwealth, offering a space for real cross-stakeholder experience and knowledge sharing, learning and dialogue. Smaller and less advanced member countries are enabled to engage through the sharing of knowledge and the awareness and capacity building element provided by the Secretariat's CCA team. The clusters are led by (mostly) senior trade officials, who brief their colleagues on the cluster work at the senior trade officials meetings (STOMs).<sup>15</sup>

Consensus building is both an outcome and a process that cuts through all phases (concept, design, piloting and scaling) and all levels (CHOGMs, CTMMs, STOMs, national design consultations, cluster weeks, etc.). Consensus is built among member country officials in capitals to meet the expectations of the declaration that was adopted

<sup>13</sup> See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2017), Commonwealth Trade Ministers Roundtable. See also the Chair's Summary Statement, available at: <https://production-new-commonwealth-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/migrated/press-release/documents/CommonwealthTradeMinistersRoundtableChairsSummaryStatement10.03.17.pdf>; and the Secretariat's press release, 'Deputy Secretary-General calls for greater trade collaboration', available at: <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/deputy-secretary-general-calls-greater-trade-collaboration>

<sup>14</sup> See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2017), 'Working group on Trade and Investment, 1st meeting of the working group on trade and investment', internal document.

<sup>15</sup> Specifically, the cluster leads are: directors for trade of South Africa and Barbados, deputy secretaries for trade and commerce of The Gambia and Bangladesh, a former Ambassador of Vanuatu for the UK and the EU, and the Commonwealth lead at the Trade Department of the UK.

by the Apex leaders by consensus. *'Everything we do is member driven, demanded by the participating member states: we convene and facilitate them to reach consensus on the basis of which we then collect or generate the technical know-how to act.'*

The sharing of knowledge/evidence and tools for policy-making (i.e. 'equipping') has an advising or capacity building element, as it helps to raise awareness and create buy-in. The capacity building and advisory services provided by the Secretariat, in turn, have an important element of consensus building, as they give the participants an opportunity to reflect and agree on what they need. For instance, most trade officials from small and vulnerable states only for the first time learn about regulatory policy for digital trade (i.e., regulatory connectivity) in a cluster meeting; by providing them with advice and training, they are enabled to engage in technical discussions and share their ideas and priorities in their ministries. The trainings are organised virtually and address specific topics in response to specific requests (thus are not generic). Consensus/capacity building is an ongoing iterative process that ensures all members engage constructively in co-creating and implementing the agenda.

### Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution

The Secretariat's convening role and technical know-how was found to be highly valued among stakeholders. The idea of working in clusters was found to be 'brilliant' and the sharing of knowledge and providing technical support to be 'crucial'. The cluster approach was also valued highly by trade ministers in their official communique on the Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting (CTMM) held in October 2019 (paras 11–15 further elaborate on the cluster work):<sup>16</sup>

*We welcomed the operationalization of the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment through the formation of multi-sectoral thematic working groups, or clusters, involving the private sector and other international organisations. We commended the bottom-up approach to prioritisation, and reiterated the value in this multi-sectoral approach to break down silos*

*to respond to modern policy challenges, which are themselves multi-sectoral.*

Both internal and external stakeholders confirmed that the Secretariat's technical know-how made it well placed to *'develop fresh ideas, bring other expert organisations to the table, and equip the participating member states with the evidence, papers and policy tools'*. Moreover, its high level of credibility and access to Apex political and technical officials in the Commonwealth, up to the level of the Heads of Governments, made it uniquely well placed to lead on this type of work.

Stakeholders also acknowledged the unique role of the Secretariat in creating the space for a more open and productive conversation around global digital trade, compared to those held, for instance, in the WTO and other global platforms, which are typically dominated by the big powers (for example, the US, EU, China):

*I don't think I've ever heard the Pacific Islands speak in a WTO session. They're there. They're definitely members. But if you want to hear them speak openly, you need to go to the political Commonwealth meetings, because there they definitely do take the floor and have something to say. (External Stakeholder Interview, Digital Connectivity Cluster)*

Furthermore, external stakeholders praised the Secretariat's attempt to engage the private sector:

*The business community has struggled to connect into the Commonwealth for a very long time. Hence there has been an enormous gap. The CCA is a great step forward and forms a unique opportunity to correct this. It is a really good initiative that has the potential to totally transform the relation between the business world and the Secretariat. The team leading on this is doing terrific work in a very collaborative way. It is changing the game completely: there are conversations with the business world that have never happened before. (External Stakeholder Interview, B2B Connectivity Cluster)*

However, external stakeholders also reflected that the cluster mechanism was rather 'opaque' and that its engagement with decision-makers or ministers remained 'fragile'. The clusters are organised purely on a voluntary basis with an informal setup. They cannot approve or decide anything, since formal consensus is reached and decisions made at CHOGMs and the CTMM. At the same time, there

<sup>16</sup> See: Commonwealth Secretariat (2019), 'Advancing our Shared Prosperity', Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting Communiqué, internal document, p 2.

is always an ambiguity around whether member country participants are speaking for their country or for themselves:

*If the delegate from [Country X] is saying something, should he give his official government view, or should he give his expert view because he knows a lot about digital trade and digital transformation in [Country X]?*

It was also found that higher-level political consensus building had been considerably hampered by the COVID-19 situation. The only time that trade ministers were able to meet after the 2017 roundtable was at the Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting (CTMM) in October 2019. The B2B Cluster saw an opportunity to attract more attention from the higher political levels and make the case for digital trade. The Deputy Secretary at the Ministry of Commerce of Bangladesh, who leads the B2B Connectivity Cluster, took the lead for instance to put together a ministerial scoping discussion on 23 November 2020,<sup>17</sup> which was attended by trade ministers, ministers of foreign affairs, national business councils and other stakeholder representatives from across the Commonwealth. This initiative inspired and guided the work of the other clusters.

The clusters were meant to be the working spaces where technical officials could share, learn and make recommendations to implement the CCA, and figure out how to help each other. External stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation independently confirmed that, although the clusters were led by senior trade officials who also attended the STOMs, member country participants in the clusters were mostly lower-level technical officials who had limited influence on decisions; they also mostly came from small island states that were less advanced in the area of digital connectivity and digitalisation of trade. This made it often less interesting for the more advanced states to engage. The frequent (almost annual) change of the UK representative attending the cluster meetings, for instance, reflected this lack of interest and further diluted the value of the cluster work:

*The value of the cluster meetings comes from the learning from peers, but it's difficult for countries who are more digitally advanced to learn if they*

*don't have comparable peers in the group. The cluster discussions focus on problems that these countries have already solved, and on finding out where the Commonwealth Secretariat should provide technical assistance or where donor funding is needed to address the challenges in countries that are less advanced in digital connectivity. (External Stakeholder Interview, Digital Connectivity Cluster)*

As a result, some stakeholders felt that the clusters somewhat lost purpose and traction:

*The cluster leads struggle to link one cluster meeting to the next. To them, it doesn't really feel like an ongoing conversation. The cluster outcomes lack clarity and widespread buy-in on what in concrete they aim to achieve, and they lack the traction and influence needed to achieve the desired outcomes. (External Stakeholder Interview, Digital Connectivity Cluster)*

For instance, staff reflected that indeed, in the Digital Connectivity Cluster, there had been an enduring issue of continuity due to the above-mentioned frequent change of representatives and the difficulty for the two co-leads to find common ground. The other clusters reportedly found much clearer direction. The Physical Connectivity Cluster developed concrete principles and started implementing these and organising training, focused on bridging the digital divide. The Regulatory Connectivity Cluster worked on creating a shared understanding, developing principles for good regulatory practice (GRP) and organising training on how to adopt these principles.<sup>18</sup>

Staff further reflected on the limited room they had to move the CCA agenda forward:

*We need member states to sign off on everything we do, and that can be tough. They're the ones who demand and tell us what to do and thus are in control. We'd love to have greater ability to move forward more quickly, because of our pressures to report results to the BoG. However, the clusters can only move at the speed that is possible for the officials on the ground.*

Stakeholders suggest revamping and accelerating the CCA cluster work by formalising the clusters' agendas, focused on achieving very practical and

<sup>17</sup> See: <https://thecommonwealth.org/business-business-cluster-connecting-commonwealth-private-sector-support-digital-and-green-recovery>

<sup>18</sup> See: <https://thecommonwealth.org/media/event/virtual-training-commonwealth-good-regulatory-principles-and-practice>.

concrete outcomes and linked to clear milestones for formal decision-making at the CTMMs. One stakeholder suggested to focus on digital trade reform as the essential driver for post-COVID-19 economic recovery:

*Digital trade will be essential, for which we need modern legal frameworks (for example, for electronic transfer records) that are harmonised and operating across geographies according to modern law and global frameworks. Legal reform and standardisation of the international trading system are the two enabling building blocks. (External Stakeholder Interview, B2B Connectivity Cluster)*

This viewpoint was also shared by the Commonwealth Secretary-General in her reflections on 27 April 2020 on the need to leverage the 'Commonwealth advantage' to counter the economic fallout of COVID-19,<sup>19</sup> and increasingly attracts political attention – as, for instance, demonstrated by a recent debate (2 July 2021) in the UK House of Lords on Commonwealth trade:<sup>20</sup>

*Digital connectivity will be especially key, as the need to interact virtually now will transform the way people trade and do business. It is already a major area of focus for the Commonwealth, under its flagship Connectivity Agenda.<sup>21</sup> (Commonwealth Secretary-General, 27 April 2020)*

A major challenge for the global system is to reach consensus in the area of digital trade reform. This presents a niche for the Commonwealth Secretariat to create a breakthrough:

*The world is still operating on a global level rulebook that is 20 years old (from 1998), launched at the same time that Google was launched out of a bedroom. The rulebook hasn't changed, but Google and the whole world has changed*

<sup>19</sup> The Commonwealth (2020). 'We must leverage the "Commonwealth Advantage" to counter the economic fallout of COVID-19'; 27 April, available at: <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/we-must-leverage-commonwealth-advantage-counter-economic-fallout-covid-19>

<sup>20</sup> See: Background note of by the House of Lords staff, available at: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/renewing-the-uks-trading-relationship-with-commonwealth-countries/>; and in the actual record of the debate (8 July 2021), available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-07-08/debates/82923834-B9EB-4876-9842-CF2DD205BAED/UK%E2%80%93CommonwealthTradingRelationship#main-content>.

<sup>21</sup> See: <https://thecommonwealth.org/connectivity-agenda>

*dramatically. So, we are operating in quite a lawless environment. The reason that rulebook hasn't yet been updated is because India and South Africa in particular have opposed it and blocked it every single year, for 20 years. They have flagged some really important issues about how to build the capacity on the ground that will enable countries to grow their digital economies, and their questions have not been answered. Hence there remains a constant tension in the global trade discussion on digital trade. This is one of the Secretariat's niche areas, where it could facilitate a cross-geographic conversation to resolve the tension and make a huge difference that others (G7, G20, COP26, WTO) cannot make. (External Stakeholder Interview, B2B Connectivity Cluster)*

Acknowledging the limited resources and capacities of the Secretariat, external stakeholders suggested it to work with partners who were able to help drive the CCA and willing to share the burden, and to put together

*a concrete proposal that makes an irresistible proposition to the people we know want to see solutions to mobilise funding and support. (External Stakeholder Interview, B2B Connectivity Cluster)*

Summarised, stakeholders made the following recommendations:

1. To focus the cluster work in the first instance on legal reform for digital trade to support post-COVID-19 economic recovery. This should have a bigger pull effect on the need for building the regulatory enabling environment and attracting private and public investment for developing digital infrastructure and for agricultural and fishery supply chain linking.
2. To formalise the cluster work, focused on achieving very practical and concrete outcomes, and linked to clear milestones for formal decision-making at the CTMMs.
3. To encourage dialogue and collaboration between trade ministers and the business world by developing a comprehensive network database of business organisations and groups across the Commonwealth. Such a database could then be used to collect the inputs and recommendations from the business world that must go into, for instance, the CHOGM and CTMM and to obtain the

buy-in and support from the entire business and finance world: *'This would form the basis for developing a culture of Commonwealth B2B collaboration that doesn't exist at this point'*. (External Stakeholder Interview, B2B Connectivity Cluster).

4. To facilitate a cross-geographic conversation and broker an intergovernmental response to the question of capacity building of member countries (in particular, smaller and more vulnerable states) to grow their digital economies.
5. To establish a core team of strategic partners who are willing to share the burden, drive the agenda together, and mobilise funding and support from member countries who want to see solutions.

## Universal Health Coverage

### Overview: The Secretariat's approach to progressing universal health coverage

The Secretariat's ambition in the area of universal healthcare is the acceleration of universal health coverage in the Commonwealth, ensuring that no-one is left behind. The Secretariat's Health and Education Unit is seeking to advance that agenda through a three-pronged strategy that encompasses policy and legislation advancement, toolkit development and implementation, and accelerating gains (for instance, on malaria and cervical cancer).

Through the selected project cases presented below, several key interlinked impact contributions are illustrated and reflected on by project stakeholders interviewed for this case study.

A number of key strategies and elements of good practice/ added value emerged through the project cases. For example:

- The Secretariat emerged as a strategic actor in its approach to technical support, modest in size but filling key 'niche' gaps.
- The Secretariat worked consistently with a highly consultative and collaborative relationship-based approach, building and sustaining relationships with partners.
- The Secretariat generally proved to be a light, agile and responsive actor. In most instances, support was fast-tracked, avoiding the high bureaucratic transaction costs associated with bigger funding agencies. In the best

project cases, the Secretariat proved capable of adapting and even expanding its support to partners in real time.

- The Secretariat repeatedly proved its worth as a policy convenor and channel for advocacy partners, channelling evidence and providing platforms for messaging and discussion among member countries as advocates for policy change.
- In addition, the Secretariat was widely valued for its credibility, trustworthiness and reputation as a valued partner.
- The Secretariat considered the relationship between national and regional entry points, with examples of scaling up from national success, as well as drilling down from regional to national policy and legislative change.
- The Secretariat's external ways of working were backed by internal enabling: working across units to sequence steps and maximise impact and create a multiplier effect with small resources.

The Secretariat's contribution, as illustrated in this case study, integrated in particular the following Impact Pathways:

- Knowledge generation, sharing and networking in support of cross-member country collaboration and learning (IP I)
- Technical support to policy and legislative development and to institutional capacity building (IP II-III)
- Consensus building through leadership and advocacy to advance collective priority issues (IP V)

These pathways were backed by:

- Leveraging the Secretariat's convening power and strategic partnerships to enhance Commonwealth action (IP IV)
- Effective governance and leadership utilising internal capacity and expertise

### **Support to the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) legislative reform**

In this project case, the Secretariat's Health and Education Unit partnered with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and Commonwealth Pacific region member countries to support

legislative reform on health provision for non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The Secretariat's project support was focused on placing a legislative drafter at SPC to develop a Pacific NCD legislative framework.

In this project case, it was widely recognised that the collaborating agencies did not have in-house legal drafting experience. This meant that the Secretariat's technical support for a legislative drafter to develop a regional NCD legislative framework, as a tool to support national legislative reform, filled a clear technical gap.

The Secretariat embedded the technical work of legislative drafting in a regional process of consultation and dissemination. This ensured that workshop participants, having been sensitised on the regional legislative framework, returned to their respective countries seeing a clear pathway to national NCD legislative reforms.

Throughout the process, the Secretariat's institutional credibility and convening role among member countries was widely recognised and valued. At the 7<sup>th</sup> Pacific Heads of Health meeting held in Fiji in 2019, delegates recommended that progress on the legislative framework should be reported at the Pacific Health Ministers Meeting 2019, completed and then put to health ministers for endorsement.

### **The Bahamas mental health legislation**

In this project case, the Secretariat supported the Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation (CNMF) to develop new mental health legislation for The Bahamas. Through previous work, CNMF had developed and refined a model for achieving national mental health legislative reform. Recognising the quality and impact of this previous work, the Secretariat engaged with CNMF as a project partner and funded the inputs of a global expert on mental health legislation, along with CNMF administrative time according to a 50:50 timeshare.

While the Secretariat's modest financial support was extremely valuable for 'pump priming' the project, the Secretariat's value-added was more notable in respect of the high-level endorsement that it brought to stakeholder engagement in policy processes. This was illustrated by the leverage extended with the Government of Bahamas in partnership with the CNMF to establish a national advisory committee to oversee the project process

from critique to drafting to consultation/revision and finally to parliament.

Critically, this national process holds the promise of being scaled up across the region, recognising the common legal framework that exists across member countries. The Secretariat is working internally across units with the Rule of Law team (under the Governance and Peace Directorate) to look to scale this success story out to achieve what it describes as a 'multiplier effect with small resources'.

### **Commonwealth Malaria**

In this project case, the Secretariat is working in a five-year partnership with the INGO Malaria No More (MNM) UK to introduce key MNM products – its Malaria Commitment Report and Malaria Tracker Tool – into high-level policy spaces, enabling policy-makers from across the Commonwealth to benchmark and reflect on progress towards their 2018 commitment to halve malaria by 2023.

As in the case of its Bahamas mental health legislation, this advocacy approach adopted by the Secretariat's Health and Education Unit illustrates a carefully developed way of working: identifying a high-capacity advocacy partner to support financially, while helping that partner with access to policy processes and platforms.

In this partnership, the Secretariat's added value lies fundamentally in the legitimacy and reach afforded by its support and convening role. No single Commonwealth nation can drive this process and the Secretariat plays a strong role in convening Commonwealth health meetings. This hasn't yet created a consensus on new approaches to malaria per se, but without the convening role this wouldn't be possible.

### **Support to the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) on non-communicable diseases (NCD) legislative reform**

#### **Background**

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are causing a health crisis in the Pacific and are imposing a heavy social and economic burden on Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs). In addressing this challenge, the Pacific region has harmonised its approach to NCDs through the development of the Pacific NCD Roadmap and the Pacific Monitoring Alliance for NCD Action (MANA) dashboard for monitoring the progress of NCD-related policies,



legislation and actions. In 2017, it was proposed that work begin on a Pacific legislative framework on NCDs, as a collective approach to tackling the Pacific NCD crisis. The legislative framework would allow PICTs to identify gaps in their relevant legislation and move towards legislative reform or creation of new legislation.<sup>22</sup>

In pursuit of its own high-level objective of increasing access to universal healthcare in the Commonwealth, the Secretariat decided to support this emerging process of strengthening sustainable NCD legislation. The Secretariat's support was targeted at the short-term outcome of improving member country capacity to develop and implement that legislation.

### **The Secretariat's contribution**

In 2017, the Secretariat developed an MoU with the Pacific Community – signed on the margins of a leaders meeting in Papua New Guinea (PNG) – to work together on areas of mutual interest, including NCDs. This MoU, subsequently extended, represented a formalisation of a relationship at an organisational level. As the SPC was a permanent member of the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health (CACH), this provided the institutional entry point for the Secretariat to support legislative change.

Faced with the challenge of supporting NCD legislative change in all 14 member countries, the Secretariat took the strategic decision to support multi-country NCD legislation by embedding a consultant to develop a Pacific NCD legislative framework.

The Commonwealth has had a long history of placing long-term consultants in regions and countries. While this has ceased to be a tool in general use, the Secretariat's Health Unit made a strategic decision to employ this approach, placing a consultant legislative drafter<sup>23</sup> in the Pacific region, backed by strong regional institutional support and a consultative process with regional stakeholders. Secretariat colleagues reflected that this was 'encouraging as a process'.<sup>24</sup>

The legislative drafter completed a draft of the legislative framework and delivered a successful consultation workshop, with legislative drafters and development partners from across the region, on the content of the framework. Participants confirmed that the guidance in the framework would help them in their work on national NCD law reforms and legislative gap filling. Moreover, they were pleased to see the Commonwealth visible in the region and supporting this initiative.

At the 7<sup>th</sup> Pacific Heads of Health Meeting<sup>25</sup> held in Fiji in 2019, delegates recommended that progress on the legislative framework should be reported at the Pacific Health Ministers Meeting 2019, completed and then put to health ministers for endorsement. Delegates also requested that development partners continue to support the development and finalisation of the legislative framework and the subsequent development of legislation and policies at the national level.

A 2019 Secretariat monitoring mission<sup>26</sup> concluded:

*The support provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat takes advantage of the Commonwealth's expertise in providing technical assistance, and provides value for money through the effective use of the limited resources of the organisation's Health and Education Unit. The support of the Commonwealth Secretariat is recognised by partners in the region, and contributes to regional priorities in addition to the Commonwealth's own strategic priorities.*

The 2019 monitoring mission recommended that the Secretariat should continue to support the SPC by extending the placement of the legislative drafter for a further 12–24 months 'to allow for completion of the PLF [Pacific legislative framework] and support to improved NCD legislation in the region'.

### **Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution**

The deputy director of the SPC NCD Prevention and Control Programme reflected on the value of SPC's membership of CACH as the entry point for the Secretariat. He identified the importance of a relationship-based approach to working with the

<sup>22</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2019), Monitoring Mission Report, unpublished, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

<sup>23</sup> This Pacific-based consultant subsequently sadly died.

<sup>24</sup> In contrast, this approach to embedding a consultant in the region for NCD legislation drafting did not work as well in the Caribbean, as the enabling environment wasn't conducive. There was a lack of buy-in from the receiving agency and lack of support for the consultant.

<sup>25</sup> This is the technical body of Ministry of Health senior officials, which advises and makes recommendations to ministers.

<sup>26</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2019), Monitoring Mission Report, unpublished, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

Secretariat, centred on an MoU that cemented this relationship around key sectors of mutual interest (including education and health):

*We had a very good relationship with the late Commonwealth Secretariat health adviser. This evolved into fast-tracking of an MoU with mutual understanding and a trust-based personal relationship: we sang off the same song sheet.*

From the SPC perspective, the relationship with the Secretariat was at a technical level, 'allowing us access to funding that [the Secretariat] was able to tap into'. The Secretariat provided a 'small package' of technical support but in the bigger picture it filled a key gap in legislative drafting capacity. In the view of the World Health Organization (WHO) or the World Bank, this would have been considered a 'drop in the ocean' and would have involved bureaucratic high transaction costs. The Secretariat was able to fast-track it and was able to put systems in place: 'So it was a niche gap that we identified and collaborated on in real time.'

The SPC deputy director viewed this process as highly consultative. It was a desk review at base, but then engaged regional stakeholders for feedback and follow-up support, addressing the critical need to ensure buy-in from health and Attorney-Generals' offices.

The deputy director reflected that since 2019, the work had continued, but with the Secretariat's role somewhat withdrawn. The consultant legislative drafter sadly passed away in December 2020. Subsequent communications with the Secretariat to find a replacement had become protracted. In the meantime, SPC was drawing on its own resources to keep the process going:

*Here in SPC we've identified NCDs, surveillance and a critical mass of the health workforce as our niche areas. We are looking at our fly-in fly-out model of delivery as we review our business model.*

Going forward, he identified the need for further work to ensure that the MoU underpinned a more meaningful and trust-based relationship between SPC and the Secretariat's sectors/ divisions.

From the Health and Education Unit's perspective, there is a need in the future to communicate lessons learned to member countries and to continue to provide supportive technical guidance from a distance, reflecting the continuing agency of the Secretariat team.

## The Bahamas mental health legislation

### Background

In 2013, a report on the status of mental health legislation in Commonwealth countries was released by the Indian Law Society Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy.<sup>27</sup> This research assessed the mental health legislation of 46 Commonwealth member countries against the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The report concluded that mental health legislation in most Commonwealth countries was not compliant with the CRPD.

Responding to an urgent need for legislative reform on mental health across the Commonwealth, CNMF had started out in Seychelles and Botswana (with some funding from the Commonwealth Foundation) to develop a workable model to support change. This involved working closely with an international mental health legal expert who had been recommended to CNMF by WHO. There they tested and subsequently refined a model of support, streamlining it and cutting down the process by a year.

After speaking at a Bahamas nursing conference in October 2018 on mental health, during which she presented on her work in Seychelles and Botswana, CNMF's executive secretary was approached by participants who asked her if she would talk to their Ministry of Health about applying this process in The Bahamas. She began this process by undertaking a review of the Government of Bahamas's antiquated (1969) mental health legislation.<sup>28</sup>

### The Secretariat's contribution

CNMF's executive secretary recalled that the Secretariat got to hear about this work through its Accredited Civil Society Organisations (ACSOs) advisory committee for health. She attended and shared the CNMF experience of working on mental health legislation in Seychelles and Botswana.

She recalled that back in 2013, the Secretariat was initially reluctant to get involved in this process for fear of being seen to be too critical of member countries. After the ACSOs meeting, she was

<sup>27</sup> Pathare, S and Sagade, J (2013), *Mental health: a legislative framework to empower, protect and care. A review of mental health legislation in Commonwealth member states*, available at: <http://www.chpa.co>

<sup>28</sup> Report provided.

approached by the now-head of the Social Policy and Development Section, who was interested in what CNMF was doing and saw a role for the Secretariat to support this work. CNMF had sponsored an initial workshop in The Bahamas, but couldn't continue to sponsor this unsupported due to limited funds. Then Hurricane Doreen and COVID-19 both hit The Bahamas:

*So we faced the challenge of a country that wanted us to support the mental health legislative reform but it was not possible to get there due to COVID.*

She spoke with the Secretariat and together they saw a possibility of continuing the project in an inexpensive way (which they wouldn't have thought about before) using Zoom technology, something that was within the Secretariat's budget envelope. The Secretariat would cover funding for the global expert on mental health legislation (who had worked in Seychelles and Botswana) and funding CNMF administrative time according to a 50:50 timeshare.

Responding to a Secretariat request, the executive secretary then developed a concept note for this support and the process moved forward. The model applied in The Bahamas, developed and refined from her previous work, followed the following steps:

1. Analyse and critique existing legislation and make recommendations for reform.
2. Present back to Ministry of Health (MoH) and agree a CNMF-MoH MoU to take recommendations forward with CNMF.
3. Secure government agreement to establish a National Mental Health Awareness Campaign (NMHAC) with a high-profile chair with influence and reach (secured in large part due to the Secretariat's involvement).
4. Write and present a Zero Draft of the Mental Health Bill 2021 to be presented to and endorsed by the NMHAC on 25 March 2021 and generate a list of stakeholder groups to be consulted.
5. Conduct stakeholder consultations in The Bahamas remotely, set up by the chair of the MHAC.<sup>29</sup> Make some changes to the

bill following these consultations, while also sensitising stakeholders to its content and aims through a short presentation.

6. Following these consultations (completed recently), send the bill to the Attorney General's Office (which is part of the committee) to be checked against other legislation, then to the Ministry of Health, then to parliament.

She hoped that the bill would be presented to parliament in October 2021, but recognised that would be the slowest step, especially if elections brought in a new cabinet that needed to be briefed.

In its final project report, the CNMF concluded that the project successfully met all its objectives and that *'the draft Bill will be a model for further work on mental health legislation in Commonwealth countries'*.<sup>30</sup>

### **Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution**

Reflecting on the project process, the Secretariat Health and Education Unit recognised that it didn't have the capacity to resource this work alone, so took the strategic decision to work in partnership with CNMF to support its work in a tripartite arrangement with member countries.

Through this tripartite arrangement, the unit modelled an approach to promote The Bahamas mental health legislation that engaged a regional partner and embedded a consultant to work long-term with that partner.

Significantly, this partnership approach came in halfway through The Bahamas project, as part of an medium-term review-driven course correction/expansion. CNMF's previous work had generated an evidence base but this had not gained traction with member countries. The Secretariat had advocated the CNMF messaging into formal policy processes with member countries and generated awareness and demand. It then thought about how to implement across the Commonwealth family, shifting and expanding to provide technical support to CNMF and proving its role as a light and agile, responsive actor.

<sup>29</sup> With psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health nurses, social services, education, religious leaders, other health professionals, the judiciary and lawyers, and with the general public.

<sup>30</sup> CNMF (2021), *Reforming Mental Health Legislation Project: Final Report*, prepared for the Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

Looking to the future, the Secretariat's Health and Education Unit saw an opportunity to scale up the national success of The Bahamas legislation across the region, recognising the common legal framework that existed across member countries: 'So we then take this as a model for expansion.' The unit was at the time of writing connecting internally across the Secretariat to bring additional in-house expertise into the process. It was working with the Rule of Law team (under the Governance and Peace Division) and with Sport (under EYSD) to look to scale those out to achieve what it described as a 'multiplier effect with small resources'. To this end, it helped to have personal connections – for example, to ease the challenge of cost sharing. They saw this as a 'good test' of the way forward to formalising this type of cross-unit collaboration.

The executive secretary of the CNMF described an overall positive and collaborative process of working with the Secretariat on this initiative. It seemed clear that while she drove this process with her passion and commitment, the Secretariat was the 'enabler' and showed impressive vision in becoming engaged:

*You've got to have legislation to change policy and practice. For the Commonwealth Secretariat to be involved in that with limited resources through a partnering approach with civil society is a fantastic example.*

She recalled, however, that some responses were delayed when they were developing the relationship with the Secretariat and the overall process of approving the concept note and signing a contract took longer than she expected; nonetheless, communication remained good throughout: 'So I was nervous that we were taking the Government of the Bahamas along a path that wasn't going to be sustainable.'

She also observed that it would be good if the Secretariat had a higher level of discretionary funding – up to £30,000 rather than the current very low ceiling of £15,000 (above which any proposal would have to go through extra layers of Secretariat approval). The Secretariat Health and Education Unit were in any case aware of existing delays and risk of rejection from higher decision-makers.

Going forward, she saw the Secretariat as still being very much in the game, building on the 'great piece of model legislation' that they have developed: 'it would be criminal not to share this in

*the Commonwealth regionally and globally as there is a shocking lack of appropriate legislation globally'.*

At the time of writing, the Secretariat was talking with CNMF about rolling this model out to some eight member countries globally over the next four years, underpinned by a new concept note for a Commonwealth Mental Health Legislation Reform Initiative.<sup>31</sup> This, she believed, was ambitious but achievable. The next step would be for the Secretariat to have a webinar and share what had happened in The Bahamas case as the basis for inviting partners to submit expressions of interest to support rolling out this model. She was hoping that CNMF would be invited to an appraisal role.

## Commonwealth Malaria

### Background<sup>32</sup>

In 2018, Commonwealth leaders took the historic decision to commit to halving malaria by 2023 at the London Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). Fulfilling this commitment will be a vital stepping stone towards the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target related to ending malaria. During the past year, countries burdened with malaria have worked tirelessly to preserve vital programming in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the number of lives affected by and lost to malaria each year, leaders must be ready to act so that anti-malaria efforts can get back on track.

Rwanda will be hosting the (postponed) 26th CHOGM. For the first time since 2018, member countries will hear the progress review of country efforts to halve malaria. Alongside the meeting of Heads of Government, the Government of Rwanda will also host the Kigali Summit on Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases. The summit will be a vital moment to convene leaders of malaria-endemic and donor states within the Commonwealth, alongside major partners from the corporate, philanthropic, scientific and civil society communities, in getting back on track in the fight against malaria.

### The Secretariat's contribution

Given its limited capacity, the Secretariat's Health and Education Unit adopted a strategy – or

<sup>31</sup> Draft concept note provided.

<sup>32</sup> Taken from: Malaria No More (2021), *The Commonwealth Malaria Report 2021*, MNM UK, London.

'intentional way of working' – of advocating through an active civil society partner on malaria eradication, the INGO Malaria No More. From the unit's perspective, Malaria No More has a 'laser focus' on malaria across the Commonwealth. The unit's strategy was therefore to support that partner and to connect it in a convening role to policy spaces, notably to the senior government strategy space in health and the health ministers meeting:

*You could say that member states don't need [the Secretariat], given other big players with money. So, what we do is to bring people in. So, we bring them (Malaria No More) in and we guide them on what policy action would be useful/strategic.*

The senior advocacy manager at Malaria No More (MNM) UK reflected further on this process. His INGO was a small organisation with 30 employees and a modest budget (including core grant funding from the likes of the Gates Foundation), but high ambition and credibility. MNM UK was a leading partner of the London Malaria Summit 2018 day that was held before the CHOGM. World leaders participated in the day, pledging US\$4.1 billion to the malaria cause and then at CHOGM, committing to halve malaria across the Commonwealth.

MNM UK had previously had quite limited contact with the Secretariat and was not aware that it was engaging on malaria, but they came together after this event to instigate a five-year partnership commitment.

*The Malaria Commitment Report* produced by MNM UK was of huge importance to the Commonwealth. This report, along with MNM UK's Malaria Tracker Tool, involved the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health (CACH) in a substantive way as a partner. MNM UK welcomed this additional support and the Secretariat was involved and promoted the tracker. At the time of writing, MNM UK was hoping to build on this endorsed tracker and report as platform to build on, for example, through the planned Kigali Summit on Malaria, with products that could be both referenced and drawn in.

During 2018–2019, MNM UK was a lead sector actor working with the Secretariat on indicators and light-touch reporting, which was done in 2019 to feed the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health (CACH) and Commonwealth Health

Ministers Meetings in the same year.<sup>33</sup> This was important, because it brought a platform for comparative reporting across the Commonwealth and a sharp focus for Commonwealth health ministers to discuss this issue. While African and Asian countries, for instance, could meet separately, there was no other platform where Sri Lanka (eliminated five years ago) might meet with Botswana or Belize (on edge of elimination).

MNM UK drove forward meetings around CHOGM through the planned Kigali Summit on Malaria (which at the time of writing had been postponed twice). MNM UK is one of eight organising partners, with the Government of Rwanda as the chair. The Secretariat was not initially involved, but this is something that MNM UK has talked about with them.

### **Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution**

While it is too early to evaluate the impact of this five-year arrangement, both the Secretariat and MNM UK pointed to a positive process to date. Stakeholders agreed that while there was no financial transaction in this case, it was a principles-based partnership.

In this partnership, the Secretariat's added value lies fundamentally in the legitimacy and reach afforded by its support and convening role. No single Commonwealth nation can drive this process and the Secretariat plays a strong role in convening Commonwealth health meetings. This hadn't yet created a consensus on new approaches to malaria per se, but without the convening role this wouldn't be possible:

*I can think of few better bodies that better span the globe than the Commonwealth, encapsulating low- and middle-income countries.*

Going forward, there was a sense that their partnership approach grounded in the five-year agreement could possibly be strengthened around an MoU, with a clearer understanding of the role and contribution of each partner. MNM UK suggested, for instance, that the Secretariat could be further

<sup>33</sup> Then COVID-19 struck, with severe implications for malaria treatment. Malaria has symptomatic overlap with COVID-19, so the impact was more than just disruption to supply chains and treatment (if you've got malaria, you need to seek treatment in contrast to COVID-19 infection).

mandated by a body like the CACH on what it could work on and what it could prioritise. At the time of this evaluation, there was a commitment to a biennial Commonwealth health ministers discussion on the malaria eradication progress of countries, which would then be reported at CHOGM.

The Secretariat certainly has convening strength, but the quality and sustainability of its support to multiple processes frequently comes back to capacity being stretched across a lot of areas. To civil society partners like MNM UK, this can create challenges of predictability and foresight in terms of how much lead-in time they get to work on things as partners.

There was certainly mutual awareness of this ongoing challenge facing the Secretariat's Health and Education Unit to maintain and further strengthen its in-house capacity in the face of a broad scope of work and ongoing budget constraints. With extra time and resources, the MNM UK's senior advocacy manager reflected:

*So much more could be added incrementally in terms of convening and capacity building (for example, around the child malaria challenge)...It all comes down to the capacity of the [Secretariat] to engage and drive forward, embedding meetings ever more effectively in ongoing policy processes.*

Taking a relatively set number of initiatives and driving them forward is one response: 'Obviously we would like malaria to be one of these.' While the target of halving malaria by 2023 may be missed, MNM UK was delighted to see Commonwealth health ministers resolve to continue their commitment, especially with the growing possibility of vaccinating against malaria.

## Climate Action on Living Lands (CALL)

### Background

Faced with an accelerating global existential threat, climate action has quickly become a very crowded space. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in particular triggered the emergence of multiple global climate funds and actors, backed by complex and overlapping governance structures.

The Secretariat's Climate Change Section focuses on strengthening the resilience of Commonwealth countries to the negative impacts of climate change. It facilitates capacity development of member countries to access public and private

climate finance for climate mitigation and adaptation. The section's remit also involves influencing international policies, mechanisms and rules to be more responsive to the development needs of countries vulnerable to climate change.

Numbered among Commonwealth member countries are some of the most vulnerable to climate change impacts. Recognising this and its strategic co-ordinating role, the Secretariat has developed a range of platforms, mechanisms and initiatives to contribute to climate change management and mitigation among member countries.<sup>34</sup>

During the present strategy period, the Secretariat's Climate Change Section has worked to define more clearly its added value and boundaries of work for advancing climate action. The section has recognised the need to maximise impact with limited resources and acknowledged the clear steer from member countries that they wanted the Secretariat to avoid duplication in the crowded climate landscape.

### The Secretariat's response

With this context in mind, the Secretariat determined to pursue a programme of scaled delivery of co-ordinated and accelerated climate action through a mutually reinforcing combination of external strategic partnership building, backed by internal programmatic synergy.

#### Towards an external strategic partnership

The Secretariat's approach to building external strategic partnerships has been channelled through a set of MoUs with the three Rio Conventions on desertification (UNCCD), biodiversity (CBD) and climate change (UNFCCC), and with regional organisations, in which the Secretariat has a defined and complementary co-ordinating role to play.

The Secretariat now seeks to build a mandate for this role through consultations on a draft Commonwealth Living Lands Charter, which is expected to be adopted at the next CHOGM. The charter is presented as:

<sup>34</sup> These include, notably, the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH), Disaster Risk Finance Portal, Law and Climate Change Toolkit, Commonwealth Universal Vulnerability Index and Commonwealth Sustainable Energy Transition (CSET) Agenda.

*a commitment to work towards climate resilient and sustainable land management in member countries by integrating the targets of the three Rio Conventions thus catalysing progress in achieving the SDGs, including SDG 15.<sup>35</sup>*

With this draft charter, the Secretariat's proposed external leadership role is clearly defined as supporting member countries in co-ordinating in-country actions to implement commitments agreed under the three Rio Conventions. The urgency of this Charter, in tandem with the Blue Charter,<sup>36</sup> is framed by a restatement of the threat to vulnerable member countries posed by climate change to a range of ecosystems across the world. In summary, the Commonwealth Living Lands Charter endorses:

*the Commonwealth Secretariat to play a leadership role in the co-ordination of UN-led processes to support member countries in synergising implementation of the commitments agreed to under the three Rio Conventions.<sup>37</sup>*

In the draft charter, the Secretariat lays out the geographical and actor scope of this co-ordinating approach to meeting Rio Convention commitments. This captures regional, national and subnational co-operation around transboundary land management challenges. It also acknowledges the important partnership role of non-state and private sector actors, including the potential contribution of Commonwealth Accredited Organisations.

Finally, the charter summarises a plan of implementation, which it describes as a 'five by five' approach:

*incorporating five land and climate change thematic areas led by Action Groups and supported by Commonwealth member countries guiding the roll out of five implementation strategies in consortium mode with national, regional and international actors to address identified priority land issues.*

In developing the charter and fleshing out the Secretariat's strategic co-ordinating role, the Climate Change Section invested considerable

time in consulting member countries to build understanding, consensus and collective ownership in the run up to CHOGM and COP 26. This took the form of a series of regional<sup>38</sup> and bilateral<sup>39</sup> consultations to develop and implement the charter.

Member countries broadly praised the Commonwealth's use of its convening power to propose the Commonwealth Living Lands Charter and supported the role of the Commonwealth as a facilitator and thought-leader.

Clearly, the complexity of the process and of managing member country expectations and concerns surfaced through the consultation feedback. Some member countries flagged concerns over the Secretariat's resource capacity to co-ordinate the charter implementation and over sustainability of implementation and resourcing. Others expressed concern around potential duplication with comparable global initiatives. Still others raised questions around overall conceptual clarity of focus and/or around overlaps between the five thematic areas (including a concern about cross-cutting issues) and on the need for more concrete detail on plan implementation. The rigour and detail of push back on the draft charter confirms both the credibility of the Secretariat in this role but also the complexity and the importance of this consultation process in building consensus.

### **Backed by internal programmatic synergy**

The internal strength of the Secretariat's Climate Change Section is well established and most notably evidenced by its ongoing management of its Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH), in operation since 2016 and recently evaluated.<sup>40</sup>

While the section's flagship programme remains the CCFAH (with ongoing regional strengthening across Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific via a hub and spokes model), its approach to building internal synergy has been to strengthen the

<sup>35</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), *Commonwealth Living Lands Charter: A Commonwealth Call to Action on Living Lands (CALL)*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

<sup>36</sup> The Commonwealth Blue Charter, available at: <https://bluecharter.thecommonwealth.org/>

<sup>37</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2021)

<sup>38</sup> The Climate Change Section continues to talk with regional institutions in Africa and with the three regional UN Conventions.

<sup>39</sup> Bilateral consultations were held with some 18 High Commissions from six regions. In addition, three member countries provided technical feedback via a survey.

<sup>40</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2021), 'Evaluation of the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub: Final Report', *Evaluation Series 120*, February, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.

co-ordination and coherence of all of its ongoing climate change-related platforms, mechanisms and initiatives. This means speaking to, but also going beyond, the Living Lands Charter in order to draw out and maximise the impact of all available resources.

This synergy building approach extends to other programmes that cut across the landscape of supporting policies and strategies. In particular, there is a strategic push within the Climate Change Section to integrate/mainstream gender and youth<sup>41</sup> considerations, to work closely with the Blue Charter initiative, and to engage with both the EYSD Vulnerability Index (into which climate change has been integrated) and the Disaster Risk Portal for Vulnerable States.

### Conclusion

In the build up to CHOGM and COP26, the Secretariat's Climate Change Section has taken a clear strategic decision to provide Commonwealth co-ordination and leadership of the proposed Living Lands Charter, backed by a coherent and synergistic internal portfolio of climate change-related activities.

This strategy is highly ambitious but purposeful. There will not be a lot to report on the process and its outcomes until the Living Lands Charter takes its first approval at CHOGM and is then implemented post-COP, with tenders in the pipeline at the time of this evaluation.

Even though the section's twin-track approach is in its early stages, there is great promise of impact based on the assumption that the section will be well placed to prove its effectiveness in co-ordinating synergised Rio Convention implementation. This will involve strategic leveraging of the Secretariat's core assets and mandate by using its convening power and strategic partnerships to build consensus and advance collective responses to the UN Convention priorities across member countries.

With the second five-year round of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) now starting, the Climate Change Section will be in a position

to help with agenda setting and implementation, particularly focusing on supporting advocacy by smaller and more vulnerable member countries at key platforms such as CHOGM and COP26. To this end, the section has requested the establishment of a climate ministerial (comparable to the women's ministerial) in order to achieve more equitable participation.<sup>42</sup>

In pursuing greater internal synergy, the section is only too aware that budget and HR issues remain important aspects in this process. It is significant, for instance, that the section pushes back on short-term consultancy as an approach in favour of building in-house capacity. Additionally, the coherence of this synergy will need to be perceived as such by external partners. Following member country feedback on the Secretariat's proposed co-ordination of the Living Lands Charter implementation, there will undoubtedly be work to do to communicate how the internal programme mix will serve the charter's implementation.

## Commonwealth Meridian Debt Management

### Background

Debt transparency is essential for countries to ensure sound lending decisions and for investors and lenders to assess a country's creditworthiness. It contributes to ensuring the overall sustainability of government debt and helps governments to access finance to strengthen their social and market infrastructure and institutions, which will be ever more critical for post-COVID-19 recovery spending – in particular, for instance, in the digitalisation of trade and public services and in education and healthcare system strengthening.

A report by the IMF and the World Bank that was presented to the G20 in June 2018, raised critical issues related to public debt non-transparency in developing countries being linked to significantly higher debt levels than officially reported.<sup>43</sup> The issues are concerned with the prevalence of weak standards and weak institutional capacities and IT infrastructure for debt recording, monitoring and reporting, as well as a fairly widespread abuse

<sup>41</sup> One important area for the Climate Change Section's youth engagement is to focus on sustainable finance for entrepreneurship through capacity building for access to climate finance within youth, utilising the section's role as the finance access hub.

<sup>42</sup> The current system involves a country-level consensus process which favours more powerful countries.

<sup>43</sup> See: Robinson, M (2021), 'Debt Transparency and Data Quality in the Caribbean', *Small States Matter*, No 2. Commonwealth Secretariat, London.



and hiding of debts, which together have led to a significant breach of debt sustainability thresholds. Several Commonwealth member countries suffer similar critical debt levels, characterised by weak institutions and underdeveloped debt management frameworks.

Debt management is a flagship programme of the Secretariat that offers a unified public debt management system and technical support to member countries for using the system to develop a strategy for mobilising financial resources, achieving debt (re)financing, debt relief and debt restructuring where necessary, and attaining long-term debt sustainability. The programme contributes directly to SDG 17.4 and indirectly to all other social and economic sustainable development goals.

The Secretariat's debt management system, CS-DRMS, has been in place since 1983 and has undergone several upgrades. It is widely used by roughly 44 Commonwealth member countries and 15 non-Commonwealth countries. However, growing international demands regarding debt transparency, debt reporting and debt sustainability made it necessary to rethink the system. Following approval of the Board of Governors of a CFTC-sourced budget of £3.4 million, the Secretariat commissioned an India-based software company to develop a new public debt management system to meet the new requirements and ensure Commonwealth member countries can monitor and safeguard sustainable debt levels. The new system, called Commonwealth Meridian, was launched in July 2019.

### **The Secretariat's contribution**

Commonwealth Meridian is an online solution that draws on the latest state-of-the-art technologies and allows for the integrated and comprehensive recording, management and analysis of both public and private debts, grants and lending portfolios. It is customised to the countries' IT and institutional infrastructure and governance structure (for example, centralised, decentralised, hybrid) and is configured around its users (for example, ministry of finance, debt management office, central bank, international funders and aid agencies) to ensure remote access to streamlined debt management information. Meridian is designed to effectively support modern debt management offices through a comprehensive set of functions, most

of which did not exist in the old CS-DRMS system (for example, contingent liabilities management, private sector external debt management, and comprehensive reports based on internationally recognised standards).

The Secretariat's Debt Management Unit assists member countries' who sign the Commonwealth Meridian license agreement to validate and migrate their data from the old CS-DRMS debt recording system into the new online Commonwealth Meridian system, and provides capacity-building support during the three-to-four months parallel test-running of the new system. In collaboration with trusted high-capacity partners (such as the Institute of Eastern and Southern Africa [MEFMI]), it provides interactive training at the regional level, as well as post hoc 'help desk' support to ensure that member countries can fully transition to the new system (after the installation, migration and testing has been completed) and cement its benefits for the country. Emerging issues and gaps are systematically identified and addressed in close collaboration with the users.

Commonwealth Meridian – and by extension the Secretariat's Debt Management Programme – concerns a brand or niche area that is technical and does not seem to involve much political consensus building among member countries. Hence its implicit programme Theory of Change (ToC) mostly draws on Impact Pathways II and III, that is, providing tailored technical support and strengthening institutional capacities. However, there appears to be a rising need for knowledge generation, sharing and networking among member countries and (national and international) stakeholders around newly emerging trends around sustainable debt management (that is, Impact Pathways I). Considering the upcoming digitalisation wave, in particular in relation to trade, there might also be a need to engage more in convening and consensus building (that is, Impact Pathway V) in the next strategy period.

### **Stakeholder reflections on the Secretariat's contribution**

All stakeholders interviewed for this case study confirmed the enormous value and robustness of the system and of the technical training and support provided to them. Concrete benefits that were mentioned included the ability to plan, project and access finance for investments contributing

to the sustainable development of the country, and the ability to successfully apply for debt relief (for example, to the World Bank during COVID). System and capacity development for integrated debt management and strategy development was viewed as being essential for a country's achievement of the SDGs (in particular, for the eradication of poverty, the provision of public health services, quality education, water and sanitation, the sustainable use of energy and natural resources, and for the sustainable development of industries and infrastructures).

All stakeholders argued quite convincingly that this was a niche area of work for the Secretariat that could not be done by others. Debt management is a specialised technical area that requires technical expertise, combined with knowledge of the countries' systems and institutions, built on deep relationships of trust. The value of the Commonwealth Meridian system was also highly regarded by the international community (including by the World Bank and the IMF).

The staff at the Secretariat's Debt Management Unit mentioned significant challenges during COVID-19 lockdowns in delivering assistance and training to the member countries:

*People were out of office for long periods and working from home, sometimes in very remote areas where internet connections were very limited, making it difficult to work virtually.*

Data validation and migration was hampered by connectivity issues and by the lack of hands-on support and guidance, leading to data quality issues. Not having the opportunity to work side by side with the country's debt management team for eight hours a day during the two-to-three weeks of an in-country presence made it difficult to have everyone focused and engaged to work as a team to understand and address data quality and transfer issues together. The Secretariat's Debt Management Unit tried to address these challenges by:

- adjusting its training and support methods and tools to make them work online through screen sharing;

- letting the country teams prepare the setup themselves before the training; and
- developing e-learning courses and e-training of trainers.

Stakeholders furthermore confirmed the need for continuous and preferably in-country follow-up support to ensure the system was being properly used by all users to generate sustained changes in the countries' debt and lending practices. Building capacity within the region and providing opportunities for peer-to-peer support and learning was mentioned, both by internal and external stakeholders, as an important element in the scaling up and sustaining of results.

Staff at the Secretariat's Debt Management Unit also mentioned the need for public debt managers to continuously update their knowledge and awareness around global trends and requirements in the area of public debt management. In the new strategy period, they plan to develop a platform and network for knowledge sharing and learning among member countries, about these new trends and about countries' experiences and achievements with regards to debt management strategy development.

Acknowledging the opportunities for achieving a bigger impact, the Debt Management Unit is also exploring options to build cross-unit synergies in the new Strategic Plan with the Climate Change Section and the Oceans and Natural Resources Unit (for example, for accessing climate finance and support for sustainable resource development).

Essential for the Secretariat to maintain its reputation and expertise in this niche area is to retain its internal staff capacity and expertise. A concern to the Debt Management Unit was the decrease in funding of its work. The Board seemed to have lost interest in debt management in recent years, while this is a crucial precondition for achieving sustainable development and democracy and will become ever-more critical in the coming years for countries to finance their social and economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Annex D: Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaires

### Interview questions for multi-case study

1. What is your understanding of the project/ programme?
  - What is it trying to achieve?
  - What are the benefits, for whom?
  - What is the relative coverage ratio (for example, member countries being reached)?
  - What are the key interventions?
  - Who are the actors involved, and what is their role?
2. What are the (potential) impacts in the longer term?
  - What is the potential impact, within and across member countries?
  - What is the Value for Money (VfM) for those member countries that do not directly benefit?
  - What is the benefit / impact for the Commonwealth as a whole?
  - How do these impacts link to the Commonwealth Charter and the SDGs?
  - How likely will these impacts be achieved, and why/why not?
  - What knowledge or evidence would support or indicate these impacts?
3. What are the key pathways chosen to deliver these benefits and impacts?
  - IP I. Knowledge generation, sharing and networking
  - IP II. Technical support related to policy and legislation
  - IP III. Technical support to institutional capacity and country-level capabilities
  - IP IV. Leveraging of core assets and mandates to enhance the Commonwealth system (incl. convening power, partnerships, co-creation and innovation)
  - IP V. Consensus building through leadership and advocacy promoting the Commonwealth values and principles

- Any important pathway that is missing in the above list?
4. What is working best and why? What is most challenging and why?
    - How is the Secretariat delivering these benefits and impacts under COVID restrictions? What is it doing differently, and how does the adapted Way of Working affect its ability to achieve impact?
    - How well is the Secretariat able to build synergies and leverage its unique assets and mandate (in particular, its convening power, partnerships, and historical role and position) to achieve these benefits and impacts?
    - How does its governance, structure and resource allocations support (or undermine) the delivery of these benefits and impacts?

### Interview questions for internal inquiries

#### General

1. What is your role in the XXX Directorate? Describe a recent achievement which made you proud to play this role. Describe the major challenges or constraints that can make it difficult to play your role
2. What do you think is the mission of the Commonwealth Secretariat?
3. What is the Secretariat's added value compared to what other intergovernmental organisations do (for example, UN, regional) in the area of XXX? What does the Secretariat do differently and/or best?
4. How does XXX combine efforts in 'consensus building', 'technical support' and 'knowledge sharing and networking' to help the Secretariat deliver on this mission?
5. What lessons can be drawn from working under COVID-19 constraints to improve this combined delivery model?
6. How does the Secretariat leverage its convening power and position to build consensus and incite collaboration among member countries in the area of XXX? Give a concrete example of a major success / failure, and explain.

7. How does the Secretariat combine technical expertise and partnerships to achieve impact at scale in the area of XXX? Give a concrete example of a major success / failure, and explain.
8. How does XXX co-ordinate within its own directorate as well as with other directorates to build synergies for achieving impact at scale across the Commonwealth? What has worked well / less well, and why?
9. How effective is the Secretariat's governance and management structures in enabling the organisation to collaborate and build synergies across directorates/units?
10. How effective are the Secretariat's planning and budgeting processes in properly resourcing for achieving its ambitions?
11. Is the Secretariat's internal staffing versus external outsourcing pattern fit for purpose? How can it be improved with the limited resources it has?
12. How well is gender mainstreamed in the XXX work? What resources are made available to mainstream gender?

### For Partnerships and Innovations

1. What do you think is the mission of the Commonwealth Secretariat?
2. How do innovations and partnerships help the Secretariat's combined efforts in 'consensus building', 'technical support' and 'knowledge sharing and networking' to deliver on this mission? Give a concrete example of a major success / failure, and explain
3. What is the Secretariat's added value compared to what other intergovernmental organisations do (for example, UN organisations, regional intergovernmental organisations)?
4. How do partnerships and innovations co-ordinate with the directorates to build synergies across the Secretariat's portfolio for achieving impact at scale across the Commonwealth? What has worked well / less well, and why?
5. How effective are the Secretariat's governance and management structures in

enabling the organisation to collaborate and build synergies across units for achieving impact at scale? What has worked well / less well, and why?

6. How effective are the Secretariat's planning and budgeting processes in properly resourcing partnership development and innovation across the portfolio?
7. How well is gender mainstreamed in the work of Partnerships and Innovation? What resources are available to mainstream gender?

### For Human Resources

- 1.. What is your role in the Secretariat?
  - Describe a recent achievement which made you proud to play this role.
  - Describe the major challenges or constraints that can make it difficult to play your role
2. What do you think is the mission of the Commonwealth Secretariat?
3. What is the Secretariat's UVP?
  - What is its value-add compared to other global or regional IGOs?
  - What does it do differently and best?
4. How does the Secretariat deliver on its mission and mandates? What are the major types of activities it implements to achieve its desired outcomes?
5. How does Human Resources support the Secretariat to deliver on its mission and mandates?
  - Is the current internal staffing versus external outsourcing approach fit for purpose?
  - What support is provided to individual staff as well as teams to perform and deliver?
  - What support is provided for competency development necessary to perform and deliver
  - What special support has been provided for working under COVID-19 constraints?

- What has been done in recent years to overcome the low morale among staff? (which is shown, among others, by the very negative postings about the Secretariat on online platforms for information about employment such as Glassdoor).
6. How does HR help the organisation to develop?
    - What is its HRD strategy to build, attract and retain talent and build institutional memory?
    - What is done to develop a culture that is more conducive and makes the Secretariat a place where people want to work and feel encouraged to collaborate and create value?
  7. What policies are in place to ensure gender equality and avoid gender-based harassment?
  8. What grievance redress mechanisms are available to staff to file complaints and obtain support from HR in situations of discrimination, harassment, or failure of leadership?

### For Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

1. Biggest achievement of MEL in the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21?
  - Describe the sustained outcomes
  - Describe the level of engagement and ownership of results
  - Describe the challenges you encountered
2. Biggest ongoing issues with MEL at the different levels (project/country, programme, organisational)?
  - Structural causes of these issues?
  - Attempts to address these?
  - Challenges encountered in trying to address them?
3. How to strike the balance between
  - input/output-focused RBM; and
  - the need for better evidence of outcome-level results in particular of combined 'impact pathway' delivery?
4. How could Innovation and Partnerships help the organisation generate, use and learn from 'better evidence'? (for example, collect 'big data' and needs maps of the Commonwealth for creating a baseline and assessing progress across for the 4 strategic outcomes...)
5. What is done to encourage evidence-based learning and utilisation of MEL findings at the different levels, both within and across units and divisions?
  - Use/uptake of evidence mappings and syntheses of recommendations by Senior Management?
  - Use/uptake of impact pathways
  - Use/uptake of MEL plan

### For Portfolio Management

1. What is your role in the Secretariat?
  - Describe a recent achievement which made you proud to play this role.
  - Describe the major challenges or constraints that can make it difficult to play your role
2. What do you think is the mission of the Commonwealth Secretariat?
3. What is the Secretariat's UVP?
  - What is its value-add compared to other global or regional IGOs?
  - What does it do differently and best?
3. How does the Secretariat deliver on its mission and mandates? What are the major types of activities it implements to achieve its desired outcomes?
4. How does Portfolio Management support the Secretariat to deliver on its mission and mandates?
5. How does it help the organisation to remain focused to achieve impact?
  - How does it help select and prioritise (technical support) projects? (for

example, country evaluations call for greater alignment with national priorities through country programming linked to the NDPs, with specifications for counterpart contribution and sustainability. But there are simply not enough resources for building national partnerships and coalitions to do this well and achieve better outcomes everywhere.)

- What special measures have been taken for portfolio management under COVID-19 constraints?

### For Finance

1. What is your role in the Secretariat?
  - Describe a recent achievement which made you proud to play this role.
  - Describe the major challenges or constraints that can make it difficult to play your role
2. What do you think is the mission of the Commonwealth Secretariat?
3. What is the Secretariat's UVP?
  - What is its value-add compared to other global or regional IGOs?
  - What does it do differently and best?
4. How does the Secretariat deliver on its mission and mandates? What are the major types of activities it implements to achieve its desired outcomes?
5. How does Finance support the Secretariat to deliver on its mission and mandates? How does it help the organisation to find a balance between compliance and responsibility to achieve results and become more effective?
6. Would it be possible to provide us with an overview of the internal and external audits that have been conducted in the strategy period 2017/18–2020/21? Including (if possible): who commissioned them, the date of commissioning, the purpose or reason why the audit was commissioned, who conducted the audits, and the activities and budget

amounts that were audited. Also, a sample of the audit reports (internal and external) for us to scan through would be helpful.

### For the Secretary-General

1. What is your vision for the organisation in 2024/25?
2. What are, according to you, the five major internal changes that need to happen to get to that vision by 2024/25? (for example, in terms of the organisation's culture, value proposition, governance, resourcing, and knowledge)
3. How do you see your role in making this happen? What will make it difficult for you to play that role well?
4. What recommendations would help create the conditions for you to play that role well and succeed?
5. What legacy do you believe you will leave at the end of your mandate?
6. What are your reflections on our main recommendations? (will be shared during the meeting)

### For Board members

1. What do you think is the Secretariat's place or niche in the global system? What is its added value compared to other global or regional IGOs (or what does it do differently/best)?
2. With its broad mission and wide range of CHOGM mandates serving so many countries with such a modest budget, how can the Secretariat use its position and influence most effectively to achieve and demonstrate impact across the Commonwealth?
3. How could the Board further strengthen its support to the Secretariat to focus and achieve sustained change and impact across the Commonwealth?
4. What is your vision of where the Commonwealth should be heading over the next five years? What should change in the organisation and its governance and funding structure to make the Secretariat fit for purpose to get to that vision by 2025?

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