



The Commonwealth

Commonwealth Learning Week 2021

Discussion Paper

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Commonwealth Connectivity and Networks

Lessons Paper by the Commonwealth Secretariat

Background

This paper identifies lessons for the Commonwealth Secretariat ('the Secretariat') related to impact. Target users for this paper are decision-makers in the organisation, from those involved with internal and external governance mechanisms to senior managers and individual employees. The paper distils lessons emerging from evaluations, meetings and action learning groups. It proposes actions to be taken forward by senior management and team leaders. This learning will also inform discussions on the development of performance indicators for the Secretariat to track progress in the effective delivery of its impact pathways in the new Strategic Plan.

The Commonwealth Secretariat's impact pathways

'Impact pathways' are the delivery strategies employed by the Secretariat to respond to the needs of member states, as expressed through the organisation's Strategic Plans. The 'pathway' refers to the change processes through which the Secretariat's actions are expected to contribute to desired outcomes. Beginning in 2012, the Secretariat identified a number of such pathways. It refined these during the development of the current Strategic Plan to the following:¹

1. Consensus Building, Thought Leadership and Advocacy
2. Policy and Legislative Development
3. Institutional and Capacity Development
4. Networking, Knowledge Generation and Sharing
5. Performance Management

Each pathway draws on the Secretariat's experience, knowledge and competencies in delivery to inform practitioners' theories, hypotheses and expectations of how actions taken and packaged will lead to desired results.

In the current Strategic Plan, the Secretariat had a pathway for Networking, Knowledge Generation and Sharing. 'Steps' in the pathway included:



The 2020 consultation for the new Strategic Plan reviewed each pathway and focused on the theory of change and enabling factors for successful delivery. It reviewed the expected result stages and discussed assumptions, dependencies, stakeholder engagement

and contextual challenges. A strengthened approach would enable the Secretariat to deliver better for member countries, becoming a partner of choice, with more coherent, efficient and effective programming.

Introduction: The Commonwealth Secretariat's approach to connectivity and networks

With enhanced digitalisation across the Commonwealth, this impact pathway has evolved to a point where member states expect a variety of virtual offerings in addition to the more standard modes of delivery. Over the last four years, the Secretariat has been enabled to go further in its role as a convening and network building organisation. This is in part due to the proliferation of digital access across the Commonwealth. Finally, the Secretariat's operational environment has also altered over the last eight years.² Consequently, this impact pathway has evolved to be entitled '**Connectivity and Networks**'.

This impact pathway now refers to the Commonwealth Secretariat's delivery of support through knowledge products platforms, networks and communities, both virtually and in person. It is a key delivery mechanism for every programme of work. It focuses on how the organisation produces knowledge, and how it disseminates and engages member states around this knowledge to build connectivity and networks. As digital working is expanding, knowledge networks and connectivity presented through platforms or portals are increasingly part of the Secretariat's support. This paper brings together progress on knowledge management and the many lessons learned in this area.

The Secretariat supports and nurtures connectivity and networks between member states around common themes. Our programme or technical teams develop knowledge products internally or with consultants based on engagement with member states. This are done through primary data collection and secondary literature review from the regional, national or pan-Commonwealth context. The Secretariat's value proposition is connecting knowledge producers or users to knowledge seekers across the diversity of the Commonwealth membership.

Knowledge products are developed through direct engagement with specific member states; from instructions received at senior officials and/or ministerial meetings; and via Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) outcomes. Furthermore, some knowledge products are developed without any input from member states directly, but may be identified by the Secretariat as relevant and then presented to members.³ Our access also allows us to co-create or spearhead networking opportunities between states around common themes. We can also act as an intermediary for stakeholders within member states to build formal and informal collaborations.

Learning action groups

The Strategy, Portfolio, Partnerships and Digital Division (SPPDD) convened the learning action groups in January 2021. The Connectivity and Networks Learning Action Group first met in the same month following targeted invitations to staff leading on or managing projects significantly utilising consensus building approaches. The group then met at least monthly. Through a process of reflective practice, it identified enablers and lessons in delivering effectively, as well as learning gaps. The group also reviewed and provided inputs to the draft version of this paper.

Methodology and approach

The approach taken to develop this paper included a review of evaluations carried out in the last ten years. This included Strategic Plan evaluations, programme evaluations, project evaluations and country evaluations, as well as internal reviews and audits. Most of these evidence pieces were externally led by independent consultants. Notes from the consultation carried out ahead of the new Strategic Plan, with staff and Commonwealth organisations, were also reviewed. We also triangulated evidence with outcomes of discussions on the knowledge management working groups, as well as the connectivity and networks learning action group.

We found lessons to be remarkably consistent across this diverse set of sources. This places the Secretariat in good stead to learn and address these key challenges in the new Strategic Plan and beyond.

The Lessons

Lesson 1#: Knowledge management

We need a strategic approach to data management and analytics. The Secretariat Knowledge Management Strategy presents an opportunity to introduce such a mechanism for peer learning and information sharing.

The Commonwealth Secretariat has since its existence accumulated vast amounts of knowledge, established networks and platforms, and expanded connectivity in varied forms. Understanding and commitment to data management and analytics from virtual products through the Secretariat digital transformation agenda has only been initiated in the last three years. The key programme management system (PMIS)⁴ has been found to be not user friendly and difficult to navigate with technical barriers preventing effective integration with other corporate technology that supports project management such as finance, travel, procurement and Human Resource systems. Valuable knowledge is generated and applied in country programmes, but this does not make its way into PMIS. The data within PMIS is seldom reviewed across divisions. This leads to a silo approach to programme delivery and a disconnect between staff working at the project level on similar activities.

The Secretariat needs a strategic approach to creating and managing data, including taking ownership of the collection and analysis of robust data and evidence from member states.

Findings

A review of the last ten years (2010-20) of the Secretariat's evaluations revealed that weak knowledge management was one of the top-ten recurrent findings. There was a lack of an efficient and effective knowledge management system integrating country-level data, as well as data on finance, procurement, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Substantial amounts of information are lost when staff left and there was no standard procedure for record keeping or reporting.

The 2021, (pg. 10), *Climate Finance Access Hub Evaluation* indicated that programmes that followed a Hub and Spokes approach faced challenges with information and knowledge management activities. This impacted sustainability. The evaluation noted that while peer-to-peer learning was strong, there was insufficient documentation to sustain this in the long term after the current adviser cohort had left the programme. This was a common concern for programmes in-country, where advisers are recruited for two-to-four-year periods or even less.

The Hub and Spokes (H&S) Programme Evaluation also outlined that given the long-term nature of the programme, national and regional trade advisers had developed a high degree of institutional memory. While this was beneficial, it also created a risk around sustainability if this institutional knowledge was not shared with local partners.

In 2020, the Commonwealth Secretariat embarked on inter-divisional discussion on knowledge management, which encompassed networks and connectivity, library systems, learning and development, as well as the enabling elements of technology solutions. The agreed Secretariat Knowledge Management Strategy (approved October 2020) embodies the organisation's commitment to adaptive planning, monitoring and delivery of results, as outlined in the Strategic Plan. The Knowledge Management Strategy lays out a road map to systematise internally the processes that safeguard knowledge management processes and policies and drive the longer-term culture.

Recommendations

The launch of the new Strategic Plan (scheduled for October 2021), and the approved Knowledge Management Strategy, are opportunities for us to introduce structured mechanisms for peer learning and information sharing between and within internal teams, as well as for advisers in-country. This could be done through learning action groups and other working groups, which meet on a semi regular basis and secure inter-divisional discussions towards cross-collaboration. To better capture the information sharing for future advisers and/or knowledge products, we set up an online communication platform, Btrix. External factors, such as increased remote working, pervasive use of digital tools and tighter resources, also present an opportunity to push for the capture of implicit knowledge onto digital platforms.

Lesson #2: Internal-led versus member state-led networks

If the uptake and value of hubs and portals is to be improved, we must ensure the central role and buy-in of member states. Key to this are business planning, partnerships and building on existing networks.

Connectivity and networks are often established as part of a larger project at the pan-Commonwealth level. Objectives include knowledge exchange, institutional capacity development and policy change. Goals might even be the establishment of concrete partnerships across member states. Networks that have been designed and developed internally by programme teams to produce meaningful engagement from member states require significantly more financial, technological and human capacity to shape and create user buy-in and sustainability.

Networks that are established with leadership, design and upscaling driven by member states themselves are different. These require the Secretariat to provide technology where relevant, host engagements and provide papers. However, the networks develop around the specific needs of the member states. Often these have higher-level government buy-in and officials are seen to be part of the network to secure their member states' developmental goals.

Findings

An evaluation of the Commonwealth Secretariat's *Delivery of the Commonwealth Blue Charter Programme 2018 - 2020* (2020) outlines how The Blue Charter's country-led model allows countries to join action groups on thematic areas that align with their national priorities. The Commonwealth Education Hub was a major pilot initiative in this regard. Launched in 2015, its main feature was a *Community of Practice* - a moderated

subscriber-based virtual peer-to-peer network. Members can request or share good practices, comparative experience, lessons learnt, etc.

The uptake of hubs such as this has been mixed over the years and is interrelated with the level of capacity and management supported. The planned ‘Evaluation of Commonwealth Knowledge Hubs and Centres of Excellence’ will shed light on their value to member states and lessons to inform their design and operationalisation.

We have trialled several models of communities of practice. A common thread noted by the Midterm Strategic Evaluation (2020) was a notable lack of baseline data. Needs assessment and business justification were key steps missing in the planning and delivery of these connectivity infrastructure.

While hubs/portals often have senior management buy-in and/or are backed by a few member states, the finer details - such as usability and exact type of offering - are determined internally. This results in mixed uptake. Meanwhile, annual funding structures imply that support of these networks cannot always be guaranteed over years.

A 2019 and 2020 monitoring mission to the trade clusters provided feedback from the cluster leads, members and partners on the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda (CCA) approach. This indicated Cluster Weeks’ value for cross-fertilisation. A key element of the CCA is ownership by the 54 member states through the Commonwealth Trade Ministers and Senior Trade Officials Meeting.

Recommendations

We need to ensure that the role of member states in these networks is integral, rather than being an output of these networks. This can be done via careful business case development, including costs, capacity needs, stakeholder analysis etc. This will clarify member states buy-in more formally and thereby optimise chances of utilisation.

A key part of business planning would be to scan the environment and ensure that the Secretariat’s offerings are unique and, where feasible, utilise a partnership model. This is being done with the Climate Change EBR [extra-budgetary resources] ‘CommonSensing’ project. Here, the data platform and satellite technology is provided UNITAR (UN Institute for Training and Research) with advisory and in-country support from the Secretariat. This approach allows the Secretariat to ensure outcomes and a stronger contribution while reducing its outlay of resources.

Another way to increase networking and connectivity across member states would be to build on existing regional or thematic networks. This could either be to support and strengthen those systems or to collaborate with them. Some of these networks already work closely with the Secretariat. The level of support required has also been mixed even across the same programme. For example, the impact of Commonwealth Election Professionals (CEP) Initiative activities in the Pacific has been amplified through partnership with a strong regional electoral administrators’ association (PIANZEA Network), in contrast with the Caribbean and Americas region where the comparable regional electoral association is currently dormant. In other places, the networks themselves face a diminishing funding base, credibility or unclear governance arrangements. This offers us an opportunity to fill the gaps.

Finally, there is a need to work with other organisations and partners to consolidate platforms and avoid a proliferation of unsustained platforms that undermine data security, brand and the gathering of evidence of outcomes.

Lesson #3: Substantive outcomes produced through virtual connectivity and networks

It is important for us to review challenges with delivering virtual events to learn lessons and maximise the benefits of such engagement. The model should focus on engaging participants around outcomes. While involvement may be broader/more inclusive compared to in-person events, the technology divide remains a major issue.

Immediate gains or outputs from virtual connectivity vary across the Secretariat's work. Sometimes virtual events are standalone to launch a product or opportunity, or they may offer virtual capacity building to individuals who represent member states. In other cases, virtual connectivity offers ongoing engagement and exchange of information.

Securing outputs is relatively easier (compared to in-person events) in that the results are immediate in most cases. They are easy to measure with a post virtual engagement survey. However, even these are challenged if the virtual engagement is one directional presentation, where communication prior to the event is chaotic, where time for discussion is limited, or where the technology platform being offered does not align with the capabilities of the member states.

Fundamentally, the virtual format is focused on the individual, whereas the Secretariat strives for broader strategic outcomes. In addition, tracking longer-term institutional shifts is harder via virtual engagement and even harder to evidence as attributable to the Secretariat's programmes. Building connectivity through virtual spaces doesn't always duplicate the trust building that can be achieved in person. Meanwhile, for programmes with strong links to grassroots organisations, outcomes are challenging to track.

People may incorrectly assume that virtual events are cheaper and easier to deliver. If delivered to a high standard, such events could include building interactive platforms or producing videos etc. This significantly increases costs. Teams have also discovered that as virtual events must be tightly packed to cover programmes which usually last days into a few hours (due to attention spans being shorter than for in-person meetings), they need to optimise on key discussion areas. This sacrifices networking, exchange or even building consensus.

In terms of internal coherence and knowledge management, with virtual meetings now standard practice there are often 'too many meetings'. Rationalising needs to be done at a senior level to not dilute the brand and quality of offerings. In addition, our virtual events often fail to plan for data housing spaces for recordings, presentations etc. For those who did not make the event, this limits the Secretariat's offerings and creates barriers to continued engagement on themes.

Findings

There has been limited external evaluation of the Secretariat's offering through virtual means. The upswing of virtual engagement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic needs strong reflection, both in terms of operational delivery as well as securing outputs and outcomes.

The Mid-term Evaluation of the Strategic Plan (2020) indicated that virtual engagement with Youth Networks had facilitated a rapid expansion of youth organisation that relied on Commonwealth Youth Programme support. The review team found it challenging to understand the full range of Youth Network initiatives due to the large volume of information in multiple formats.

In terms of virtual engagement, we saw a broader or even more inclusive participation across diverse stakeholder groups, individuals who had previously not been able to afford

in-person engagement. However, the technology divide is real and virtual engagement excludes other stakeholders. ‘Virtual fatigue’ was also a well-documented phenomenon by late 2020, evidenced by declining sign up for previously valued virtual engagement.

Furthermore, our programmes are securing a lower sign in versus registration rate (even compared to global averages). This indicates operational challenges with the format and structure of virtual engagement and questions of their sustainability. Teams are already beginning to work on creating video formats, embed polls in longer virtual sessions, calculate for breaks and request formal meetings for break outs for engagement.

Recommendations

We need to review the internal challenges to delivering virtual events, both operationally and in terms of programmes. This will include clarifying what outputs are expected and which Strategic Outcomes these virtual events will advance. Ideally all event and virtual engagement options and related information should be housed in one space and directed via the Secretariat website. Finally, we need to create an internal rationalisation step to ensure that virtual events are quality controlled and do not duplicate each other.

Overall a stronger ‘lessons learned’ approach is needed to ensure the virtual engagement can deliver outcomes. We should consider global industry recommendations on improving audience participation in terms of planning, timing, user journeys, breaks, games and polls etc. These can then be aligned with member states needs and technology capacities to create a standard.

The move from a *participant numbers*-focused model of just sharing invites and papers to an *engagement of participants around outcomes* model, which strengthens decision-making, policy or institutional capacity development, requires a strong review and internal agreement. Furthermore, support for post-event discussions and knowledge sharing between participants, as well as resourcing of outcome tracking, will support substantive outcomes and embedding of results.

Lesson #4: Measuring impact and showcasing success

We have made progress on MEL, but this is a challenging area for the connectivity and networks pathway. With this area often being part of a larger programme of support, evaluating and reporting frameworks need to be more nuanced. Reaching out to member states for feedback on value created should become ‘business as usual’.

The Secretariat has made substantial progress institutionalising results-based management. This has strengthened evaluation and learning opportunities within and across projects. Project Initiation documents outline member states’ needs for knowledge and connectivity and credit the Secretariat as a key catalyst in this process. However, tracking relies on programme teams’ individual planning and capacity to develop and deliver customised MEL solutions. In virtual environments, this is now easily outsourced with data analytics at least for output tracking. Unfortunately tracking user data on online platforms or virtual events was not previously common practice. Within the context of the pandemic, this has become more systematic at least for bigger events conducted virtually. However, securing data on outcomes and impact requires analysis of tracked data and further investigation into how this shared learning or spaces are creating change in country. In terms of knowledge products, there are a few striking impact stories - yet tracking reach and outcomes is extremely inconsistent across the varied types.

Alternatively, mechanisms that are member state driven and designed seem to secure milestones towards outcomes more effectively. Here, the Secretariat may provide technology, or technical advice or knowledge; however, the member states themselves

offer resourcing and/or accountability for follow-up actions nationally. This can be seen with Trade Connectivity, where the drive and focus for advancing trade comes from the member states. However, even this MEL is in its early stages and needs to be measured more scientifically against initiatives.

It is important to note that the connectivity and networks impact pathway is rarely the entirety of support offered. Consequently, locating visible outcomes for a member state at a certain point of time, and attributing these to our delivery of connectivity and networks is challenging. Furthermore, as a pathway that largely targets pan-Commonwealth stakeholders, isolating its impacts on a member state is more challenging.

Findings

The evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2013/14-2017/18 found the need for greater levels of ownership and accountability for RBM across divisions, along with leadership. *The Mid-Term Review* of the current Strategic Plan (2020) emphasised the need to continue investment in and emphasis on MEL. It also highlighted the need to deepen and diversify the evidence base by developing standards to guide staff on what constitutes good evidence, and how to utilise third-party evidence.

The planned ‘Evaluation of Commonwealth Knowledge Hubs and Centres of Excellence’ will be considered for the next Strategic plan. It could therein cover areas of connectivity and networks, will play a key role in securing evidence on the reach of this impact pathway which is currently unclear. The *Democracy Programme Evaluation* (Watson 2018) highlighted that the results the Secretariat wanted to achieve should be clearer and staff should be managed and rewarded to achieve them. The *Economic Development Evaluation* (2020) recommended the Secretariat improve the definition of indicators for measuring outcomes and impact and adopt a programme-wide theory of change.

The 2017 Commonwealth *Africa Anti-Corruption Programme Evaluation* found that officials considered results-based performance systems required collaboration between government agencies to be successful. This means healthy relationships will tend to be cemented around shared objectives and true collaboration. However, where perfunctory collaboration exists within an isolationist and distrustful environment, then results-based performance systems could result in costly confusion.

Where the value of our connectivity and networks is tracked (to the issue or to member states) and formal attribution sought, there is strong evidence that our research and publications add value to member states in specialist areas.

Recommendations

Our monitoring and evaluation systems need to be fit for purpose within the context of being a smaller organisation with significant accountabilities, the holder of public funds and one with increasingly diversified offerings. This is especially the case in connectivity and networks, which struggle to define boundaries of success. Programmes should have evaluation and reporting frameworks for the more nuanced nature of this impact pathway.

Systematically reaching out to member states to secure accreditation and acknowledgment of the value created should become part of our ‘business as usual’. This is especially key in the high-input activities that connectivity and networks often involve.

Lesson #5: Sustainability planning

We need a more systematic approach to ensuring the sustainability of the networks and connectivity pathway. Member states should lead or resource this area of work in

some way to ensure long-term use, while counterparts should be a team rather than an individual to minimise the risk of staff turnover.

The Secretariat's networks and connectivity approach needs to consider sustainability of planned outcomes and financial sustainability. The former involves the longer-term mapping of these initiatives and then of the results they create in member states. However, financial sustainability refers to the continued resourcing of initiatives across annual year budget allocations. Neither is adequately factored in at the concept stage. Nor are they usually reflected upon consistently during delivery.

The networks and connectivity pathway seldom includes a consolidation stage or a benefit mapping activity. Corporate annual reporting normally includes points of reflection on sustainability. However, these are often vague on how this is being secured. This hampers the achievement of long-term gains at the pan-Commonwealth level.

Internally, the nature of annual planning and shrinking of funding does not always allow sufficient time for a network to showcase outcomes and thereby generate sustainability. Changes in approach at the team or strategic level also undermine efforts towards embedding sustainability measures.

Findings

Sustainability was one of the issues most frequently highlighted in evaluations. Our connectivity and network interventions are most often designed as one-off and/or supply driven. There is often little commitment from member states and no engagement with potential partners for sustaining, replicating or scaling up.

On the positive side, the 2017 *Review of the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP)* found that sustainability in terms of professionalisation of youth work had been spread through: the development of a Commonwealth Diploma (and later a degree) in Youth Development Work; the availability of the accumulated resources developed for this sphere; and strong Commonwealth networks and a wide community of youth work practitioners and experts. This indicates that driving networks into a longer-term outcome that is sustained externally can be effective for sustainability planning.

The Hub & Spokes (H&S) Programme convened local and regional networks to exchange trade analysis, data and updates on trade policy developments. Four regional expert networks were created with 120 regional experts in the network. The programme mainly achieved sustainability by host institutions choosing to retain their trade adviser positions without programme funding.

Our efforts around system integration and clarifying ownership and internal processes for security, accountability and sustainability of web systems has been improved in the last two years. There is a clear procedure in place for hubs, but results-based management has yet to be embedded to these hubs.

Recommendations

We need a more systematic approach to prioritising sustainability and enabling country-ownership in our networks and connectivity agendas. This is especially the case for projects that are meant to generate long-term change. The design of connectivity and networks initiatives requires a clear business case which addresses the long-term benefits and how they will be enabled.

We must ensure that networks and connectivity are led or resourced in some form by member states. This is a bedrock of securing sustainability, especially in development

initiatives. Co-creating hubs and portals with member states based on the formats and structures they will use ensures utilisation in the longer term and value creation.

Handovers of networks should be systemic to the overall solution, with accountability of champions or resource holders or key member states officials. Resourcing for networks needs to be prioritised as a growing area of delivery within the Strategic Plan. Clear guidelines should be provided on how to ensure these are effective and reflective of the needs of member states. Engaging a dedicated team as the counterpart beneficiary rather than one individual will increase sustainability, skills transfer and strengthen local capacity, minimising the risk caused by staff turnover and movement.

Conclusion

Fundamentally defining success in connectivity and networks is extremely nuanced to the specific type of output being delivered. Defining success and quantifying outcomes are inherently challenging for this pathway in that they are harder to isolate. Efforts need to be made to systemically articulate these within programmes.

An emerging intervention area that is subsumed by this impact pathway is one of partnerships. This needs further consideration on whether it should be isolated into a distinct impact pathway and monitored as such to isolate reach, challenges and lessons.

Ensuring that the technology matches the needs of member states and their capacity to engage actively needs a thorough examination. Early indications are that digital connectivity and networks will not suffice. As travel restrictions lift, post the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid models which maintain face-to-face meetings on a limited basis, along with ongoing discussions and learning points communicated digitally, will be the way ahead. This implies that the tools of the networks and connectivity impact pathway, such as portals and hubs, will and could grow for capacity building, consensus building and could potentially offer policy guidance as well.

As a network and connectivity-leading organisation the Secretariat must continue to play to its strengths in areas where it has recognised leadership. This will continue to ensure its programmes create value in measurable ways for member states.

Notes

¹ It is expected that these five areas will be reviewed and amended over time in line with the Secretariat's learning and practices.

² For example: Reducing funding and size thereby reach in physical presence; Emphasis on Results Based Management

³ A recent example is a paper on the Singapore Mediation convention presented to Senior Officials by OCCJR

⁴ PMIS (Project Management Information System)

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Further Information

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