



Discussion Paper

Virtual, 27 - 29 April 2021

Leveraging Convening Power to Influence and Advocate for Change

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, team leaders and individuals. 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.

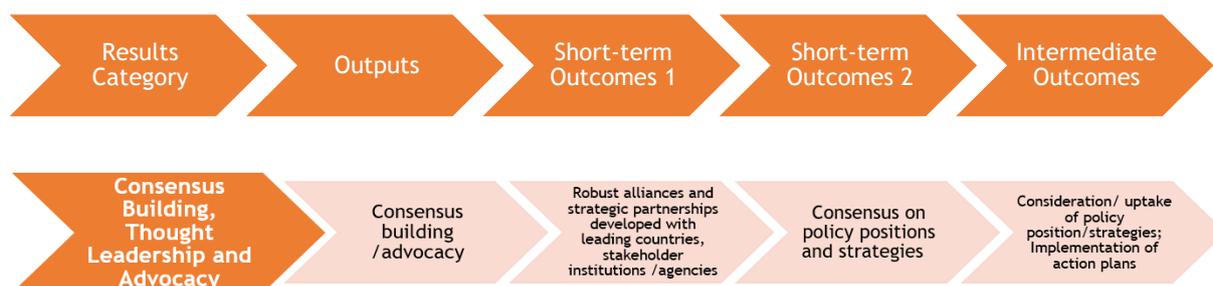
The Commonwealth Secretariat's impact pathways

'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 Consensus Building. ‘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 consensus building

Consensus building is a well-developed concept within multilateral mechanisms. It is a way to negotiate an agreed position among member states to support resolution and collective actions with maximum support. A strong consensus relies on the participation of all member states. It is reflected in an endorsement of resulting recommendations or action plans, creating a strong basis for implementation (Van den Belt 2004). ‘Consensus’ is conceived as a non-hierarchical process centred on the equal participation of all delegates in collective decisions. To promote equal participation within an unequal power structure in the multilateral system, delegates often rotate roles, particularly leadership positions, as well as sharing tasks and specialised knowledge (Snyder 2003).

In the 2017/18 to 2020/21 Strategic Plan, consensus building was identified as a cross-cutting outcome that threads through the Secretariat’s five programmatic pillars - Democracy, Public Institutions, Youth and Social Development, Economic Development, and Small and Other Vulnerable States. The Commonwealth Secretariat uses its convening power to build consensus through meetings and support processes. In this respect, it focuses on convening high-level officials, ministers and Heads of Government to discuss, share knowledge and propose responses to common issues impacting the Commonwealth or those specific to a group of Commonwealth states, such as small island developing states (SIDS). The outcomes of the meetings are agreed upon by member countries for further action.

The Mid-term Review of the current Strategic Plan cited the Secretariat’s convening power as a significant advantage both internally, among member countries, and externally, among partners and peers (Commonwealth Secretariat 2020). Consensus building is therefore a core strength of the Commonwealth in its delivery of value to member states. Commonwealth positions that emerge from these meetings are represented in global discussions, including in the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the G20 meetings and annual general meetings of the World Health Organization. In recent years, the Secretariat’s convening and visibility actions have helped focus attention on the issues facing small states. They have also

advanced practical solutions to address national problems in education, health, trade, gender equality, human rights and Sport for Development.

However, there remain key challenges to the effectiveness of these meeting. These include a decline in attendance and ensuring relevance for ministers whose presence is requested at many competing regional and international meetings.

Mechanisms such as ministerial meetings provide legitimacy to the Secretariat’s work, by creating a platform for identification and agreement of priority work areas. For instance, the Youth team utilises platforms such as the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting (CYMM) and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to gain high-level support for key initiatives of the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP). Examples of such initiatives include the Youth Development Index (YDI) and Youth Mainstreaming Guidelines. Similarly, the Secretariat’s Education team uses the triennial convening of Commonwealth education ministers to identify education priorities. These are then integrated into the team’s programming.

In addition to high-level meetings, the Secretariat’s consensus building projects also support senior officials’ working spaces, such as the Commonwealth Accelerated Development Mechanism for Education, the Commonwealth Action Committee on Health and the Commonwealth Advisory Body on Sport. These support mechanisms focus on the framing, monitoring or implementation of the outcomes agreed at the leadership level. Some of the projects also facilitate smaller working groups of ministers, such as the Education Ministers Action Groups and the Commonwealth Youth Ministerial Taskforce.

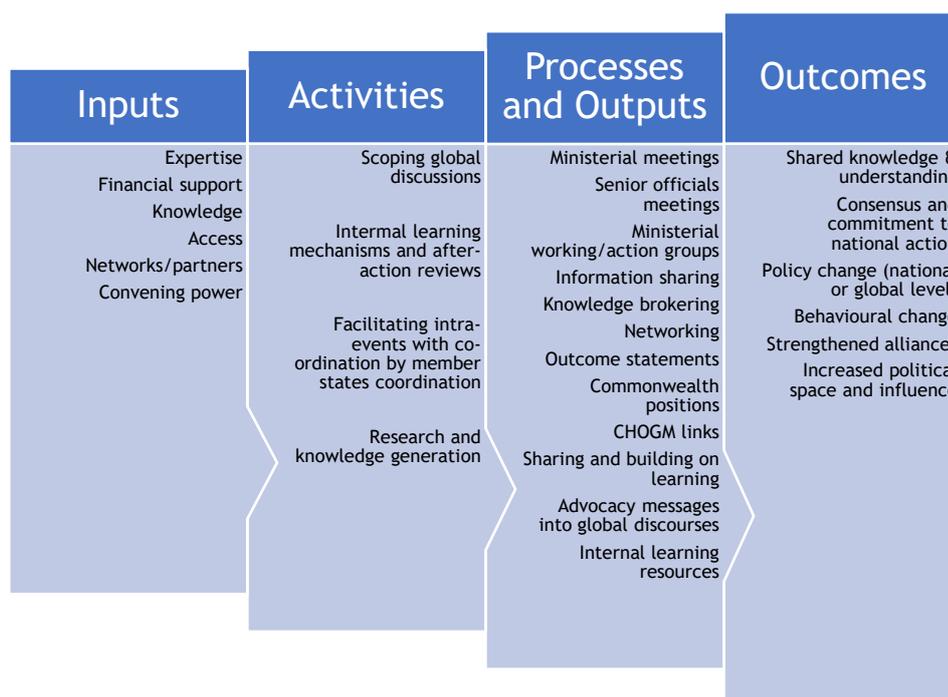


Figure 1. Programme logic for the Secretariat’s consensus building programme, i.e. how projects and actions are expected to realise the outcomes targeted

The Secretariat commissioned an evaluation in 2021 (ongoing) to assess the organisation’s performance in utilising its convening power, global presence, visibility and influence, in particular via its ministerial and high-level meetings. This was particularly in terms of its delivering benefits to - and promoting the interests and amplifying the voice of - its member

states. The evaluation is expected to inform discussions and planning on the Secretariat’s advocacy strategy in the context of the new Strategic Plan 2021/22-2024/25. The evaluation will examine the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and impact of the Secretariat’s current consensus building strategy. It is envisioned that the evaluation will further inform and sharpen many findings and recommendations presented in this paper.

Learning action groups

The Strategy, Portfolio, Partnerships and Digital Division (SPPDD) convened the learning action groups in January 2021. The Consensus Building and Advocacy Learning Action Group was launched in the same month through targeted invitations to staff leading on or managing projects with significant consensus building elements. The group met at least monthly. Through a process of reflective practice, it identified enablers and lessons in delivering effectively. The group also reviewed and provided inputs to the draft version of this paper.

Methodology

Approach

The 2021 Lessons Paper Series takes the approach of a rapid evidence assessment. It draws primarily on three sources of evidence and applies a qualitative approach to identify common themes and synthesise the lessons. These sources and methodologies are described below.

Evidence sources

1. A desk review of Secretariat evaluation reports and select literature:
 - a. a targeted literature review based on ‘consensus building’ and ‘advocacy’; and
 - b. an assessment of the Commonwealth Secretariat’s evidence library, including programme documents, monitoring and evaluation reports.
2. A series of focus group discussions with an internal action learning group of Secretariat programme staff.

Table 1. Evaluations reviewed on Commonwealth consensus building interventions

Monitoring report	Report year	Targeted member countries
Mid-term Strategic Plan Evaluation	2020	Pan-Commonwealth
Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting (CFMM)	2018	Delegates to the 2018 CFMM and Senior Officials of Finance Ministries, held in Bali, Indonesia
Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting (CLMM)	2019	Delegates to the 2019 CLMM and Senior Officials of Law Ministries, held in Colombo, Sri Lanka

Lessons learned

Themes emerged from the Consensus Building and Advocacy Learning Action Group that reflected the challenges and opportunities facing consensus building as an impact pathway.

Lesson #1: One-size does not fit all

We should adopt a clear, coherent and flexible approach to consensus building that takes into account the various levels of political engagement. We should also continue

to focus on monitoring, evaluation and learning to fully understand the Secretariat's influence and convening power.

Consensus building across the Commonwealth takes a variety of forms across different levels and portfolios of government among member states on a national, regional and international basis. Outcomes in this area range from ministerial communiqués and actionable outcomes to generally advancing the position of the Commonwealth in international fora. The biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is the Commonwealth's highest consultative and policy-making gathering. At the end of each CHOGM, the Heads of Governments agree on a set of mandates to be implemented by the Secretariat over the next few years. The Secretariat also hosts a range of annual and biannual meetings for government ministers and senior officials. For example, the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting (CLMM) is followed by a meeting with portfolio senior officials. In addition, the Secretariat hosts the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group and other 'action groups' formed on an ad hoc basis to take forward action items resulting from ministerial meetings. Beyond this, the Secretariat fills a unique and unusual space within advocacy, such as its engagement with national human rights institutions, Members of Parliament on thematic issues and with international human rights bodies.

Our current approach to consensus building lacks a coherent theory of change and an overall advocacy strategy framework that identifies levels of engagement and key audiences in its advocacy efforts. Programme teams have explored and established their own approach in delivering consensus building with different levels of resources. This has allowed for a degree of necessary flexibility to adapt to the needs of stakeholders.

Findings

Evaluations and consultations conducted over the last ten years have highlighted common challenges in this space. These include a gradual decline in member state engagement/attendance to high-level meetings, competition for the limited time/resources of member states, particularly those of small states within an increasingly crowded multilateral arena, and questions surrounding the financial sustainability of hosting such events. There is also the challenge of the sustainability in carrying out agreed items over typically a period of two to three years given tightening budget constraints. The learning action group has highlighted the challenges in translating mandates from ministerial meetings into action and the monitoring of progress.

Recommendations

We should continue investment in and focus on monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) to fully understand the organisation's influence and the value of our convening power. We should also apply consistent monitoring to all ministerial meetings. An evaluation of the consensus building role of the Secretariat to assess its effectiveness has been commissioned to begin addressing these challenges. In all evaluations of the Secretariat's work, the terms of reference (ToR) would benefit from an increased emphasis on identifying unintended outcomes, their causes and impact.

We should also create a clear framework to target delegates at different levels of government, noting what factors influence their position and how they come together to generate policies. Building on this understanding, a critical aspect of consensus building is a definition of success - that is, what does success look like? Is it unanimity among member states or an agreement not to disagree? How does the portfolio topic influence the nature of consensus, if at all? For example, to what extent does success in consensus building improve access to healthcare services compared to such successes in climate finance? Does success look different for ministers' meetings compared to senior officials

meetings? Or perhaps success is generically defined by attendance, whether delegates had a positive experience of the meeting, and whether they have had the opportunity to network and learn from their peers. This issue was also highlighted in the evaluation for the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting in 2018, whereby decisions appeared to be ‘based on endorsement by silence, rather than by provision of true mandates’.

Lesson #2: Moving beyond words on paper

We should reflect on the current approach to implementing ministerial outcomes to learn from its successes and challenges and create an agreed framework for action to move beyond words on paper.

A critical aspect of consensus building is the implementation of agreed outcomes. This includes the monitoring of progress or perhaps the lack of progress in an outcome area. At the Heads of Government and ministerial level, a key consensus building document is a declaration or a communique that sets out decisions taken by ministers and/or a new vision and priorities for the next few years.

Findings

The challenge here is centred around if and how these mandates should be built into our theory of change. This will then guide how do we deliver portfolio programmes to move a particular issue into action. For example, the current Education Ministerial Action Group was specifically established to go beyond the Commonwealth Education Ministers Meeting to take actions agreed at the meeting and drive the agenda into action. This created more opportunities for engagement and learning, especially in the context of COVID-19 impacts on education across the Commonwealth. However, several factors, including lack of resources and an analysis of outcome implementation, highlighted the limitations of the current approach.

Recommendations

We need to conduct further analysis of the effects of unexpected and rapid disruptions to the current multilateral consensus building ecosystem - due to, for example, the pandemic and natural disasters. The current organisation-wide consensus building evaluation will aim to investigate successes and areas for improvement in depth and will further clarify lessons learnt.

Lesson #3: Financial sustainability of consensus building

We should address issues of financial sustainability within consensus building through prioritisation and by exploring partnerships and building alliances to achieve advocacy goals.

In the past decade, the overall funding landscape for the Commonwealth Secretariat has been on a decline. This is reflected in a declining budget for consensus building and advocacy, coinciding with a gradual increase in the number and type of forums and meetings hosted by the Secretariat.

Findings

The action learning group highlighted the uncertainty surrounding the ongoing financial sustainability of consensus building activities, as well as the implementation of action plans agreed upon by high-level officials across its portfolio.

The Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting (CFMM) evaluation conducted in 2018 elucidated this concern. The evaluation noted that the average cost of delivering the annual CFMM between 2014 to 2018 was approx. £86,000, while the annual project budget (COMSEC and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation [CFTC]) in 2018/19 to

implement initiatives related to CFMM and its outcomes was approx. £80,000 for work in tax and regulatory environment, fintech and disaster finance; and approx. £100,000 for engagement with the G20 and other international fora. Meanwhile, Extrabudgetary Resources (EBR) of approx. £1,059,000 was used to fund the placement of national climate advisers in member states. The evaluation also noted that from the date of a request by CFMM for work in a new area to the Secretariat being able to define the scope of work, allocate time and resources to invest in this and then initiating work, the duration was around two to three years. This was the case, for example, with disaster finance and fintech. Furthermore, progress on two key workstreams originating at CFMM, namely G20 engagement and tax and regulation, has gradually waned. The former is directly linked to the inability of the Secretariat to fund and recruit required technical expertise. This can be contrasted with the success of the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub in a shorter period of time, as it was funded by EBR. This example highlights two key trends. First, the budget for convening the CFMM is comparable to the implementation of work agreed by ministers over a two-to-three-year period. Second, sustained and more effective delivery of action items tends to be those funded by EBR.

These two broad trends raise the question of ongoing financial sustainability of our ability to fund the various multilateral fora themselves. But, more importantly, given the Secretariat's decreasing budget and annual budget cycle, they also highlight that further clarification and analysis are required to ensure that our consensus building work remains relevant and responsive to needs of member states.

Recommendations

We should enhance the sustainability of our advocacy and consensus building portfolio to achieve long-term outcomes. This is particularly in terms of our ability not only to advance the positions of the Commonwealth in international fora, but also in implementing action plans as agreed at meetings of senior officials. This may be a negotiated process of prioritisation, whereby the Secretariat commits to undertake projects within CFTC or its core funding every two to three years.

Consensus building and advocacy as an impact pathway focus more on contribution than attribution. By looking at who else is working in the area, we could also explore partnerships as a way of co-funding and working to build an alliance to achieve advocacy objectives and implement actions.

Lesson #4: Virtual consensus building and advocacy: best practice

We should analyse what forms of virtual engagement are best suited to participation by member states and, if appropriate, to create a hybrid model embedded within our normal ways of working. This will not only enhance sustainability, but also increase member states' buy-in.

The past year (2020) has necessitated a change in the ways the Secretariat engages with member states and external partners. The existing modus operandi of in-person consensus building engagement has given way to virtual platforms. This has brought about changes not only to the ways we work every day, but also to the types of work possible. This in turn has been a paradoxically polarising yet levelling experience.

Findings

The minimal costs associated with virtual engagement has enabled the participation of delegates from organisations or member countries who would not normally be able to attend. However, this has also led to participation challenges, due to lack of or insufficient IT infrastructure and time zone differences. This has particularly impacted our

small and vulnerable member states in the Pacific and the Caribbean, as they are located at either end of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) working hours. An additional challenge has been a delay in decision-making by some organisations, especially in international trade.

Programme teams across the Secretariat have expressed a lack of traction and delays in engagement via online platforms with their stakeholders in-country, particularly those working in member state governments. This may also be a result of limited resources and capacity in many of our small vulnerable states, who are directing these to address the immediate fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The issue of virtual engagement is especially pertinent for projects that were initiated during the pandemic, as developing trust and rapport with stakeholders remains challenging. Some teams have used survey results and conducted an analysis of attendance, engagement and overall experience of participants to various virtual consensus building activities. This has highlighted certain trends, such as a fall in the level of engagement after the first two days of an online event.

Recommendations

The Secretariat has experienced consistent challenges in moving to virtual platforms of engagement because of the pandemic. Moving forward, it should conduct a systematic analysis to consolidate its experiences and learnings of virtual engagement at all levels. In this way, we can understand the level and type of engagement that is better suited for virtual adoption to create a hybrid model that can more effectively serve our member states. This would also reduce costs, so that a greater percentage of our funding can be utilised to implement agreed action outcomes. These learnings should be embedded in our normal ways of working, beyond the pandemic.

Lesson #5: Small states as the thematic focus

Given that the core focus of our consensus building work is mainly for the benefit of small states, we must create a more joined-up approach to prioritise their interests across the Secretariat's advocacy mechanisms.

Given that 32 of the 54 member countries of the Commonwealth are small states, it is hardly surprising that advocating to advance the positions of small states is one, if not the core, focus of the Secretariat's global advocacy and consensus building work. The Commonwealth has long been recognised as a champion of small states. Since 2010, it has convened the Global Biennial Conference on Small States, which continues to deepen international understanding of developmental issues facing these countries.

Findings

Small states are acutely susceptible to natural disasters and economic shocks, which have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Our small states member countries are also most likely to be the ones that benefit from this work, because of the disadvantages they face engaging internationally. Small states must and do speak collectively to amplify their voices. The Secretariat is one of the many platforms through which this takes place.

A greater focus on the theme of advancing the interest of small states could also support the Secretariat in measuring impact to enhance its MEL processes and outcomes. The current set of outcome indicators largely monitor the rate of participation, relevance and the experience of delegates participation. While these are important indicators, they are insufficient to measure overall impact.

Recommendations

The theme of issues faced by small states within the Commonwealth is at the centre of consensus building and advocacy work of the Secretariat. Given that the core focus of the Secretariat's consensus building and advocacy work is primarily for the benefit of small

states, the organisation should develop a cross-organisational, joined up approach that can more consistently prioritise the interest of small states across its advocacy mechanisms.

Conclusion

This paper summarises some of the key lessons learned on the Secretariat's work over the past decade in consensus building and advocacy, as reflected from various evaluations and thoughts/ideas shared as part of the learning group. Tracing these lessons highlights some of the limitations of the current approach to this space, namely the lack of an overall advocacy strategy that is consistent, targeted and flexible, and the challenges in moving beyond agreeing on outcomes to implementing actions. This is especially given issues of financial sustainability and lack of clarity in priorities, as well as how this area of work can more effectively focus on advancing the interests of small 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.

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Further Information

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