



Discussion Paper

Virtual, 27 - 29 April 2021

Enhancing Performance Towards Delivering Impact

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.

The 2020 consultation on the new Strategic Plan reviewed each pathway as part of the enabling factors for delivery. It focused particularly on greater collaboration across the Secretariat, strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning, staff development, and funding. These actions could enable the Secretariat to deliver better for member countries, becoming a partner of choice, with more coherent, efficient and effective programming.

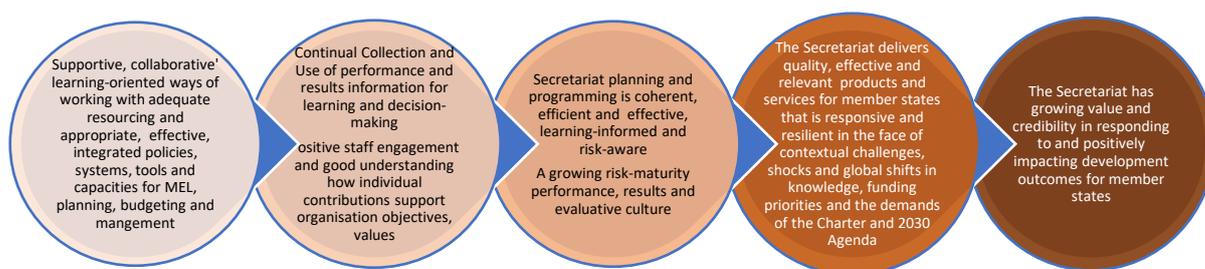
Introduction: The Commonwealth Secretariat’s approach to enhancing performance

The Secretariat has invested in significant reforms over the past five years to embed results-based management practices and enhance performance. The Strategic Plan Results Framework has been continually strengthened, with better defined indicators, establishment of baselines and targets and better aligning of the organisational theory of change. The Project Management and Information System (PMIS) was enhanced to better consolidated planning, monitoring and reporting into one platform, facilitating coherence and knowledge management. In 2018, Secretariat introduced a delivery plan with quarterly performance reviews and six-monthly reporting to better enable delivery and accountability. Overall, compliance with portfolio management practices has improved, as has staff’s understanding of results-based management.

Notwithstanding, the Mid-Term Review of the Strategic Plan as well as programme, country and project evaluations, internal audits on planning, monitoring and budgeting noted a number of endemic challenges that constitute a drag on performance and impact. These are mainly:

- weak evidencing, as well as inadequate capabilities and incentives to integrate MEL at the project level which diminishes the Secretariat’s ability to assess and credibly report on its contributions to development outcomes in member states;
- internal frustration with corporate, planning and budgeting processes and systems which are perceived to be excessively burdensome operationally;
- an unwieldy and under-resourced strategic portfolio.

Figure 1 below describes the high-level view of this pathway, reflecting the Secretariat’s current understanding of how performance and impact is enabled.



The evaluations and reviews conducted have also identified lessons and recommendations to respond to these challenges. This Paper reflects a consolidation and reflection on these lessons and recommendations as well as an extension of their utility and application given more recent experience at the Secretariat.

Learning action groups

The Strategy, Portfolio, Partnerships and Digital Division (SPPDD) convened the learning action groups in January 2021. The Implementation 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 drafts of this paper.

Methodology and approach

The approach taken to develop the paper included a review of the evaluations carried out in the last ten years. This included Strategic Plan evaluations, programme evaluations, project evaluations and country evaluations, internal reviews, and internal audits. Most of these evidence pieces were externally led. Notes from the consultation carried out ahead of the new Strategic Plan, with staff and Commonwealth organisations, were also reviewed. Evidence was also triangulated with discussions by the learning action group on implementation. Four meetings were convened for the learning action group, and two cross-learning action groups took place during March 2020.

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

Lessons learned

Lesson #1: Prioritisation

Secretariat programmes need to be better prioritised given lack of resources. Foresight/horizon scanning should be introduced to improve baselining ahead of projects. We should also consider how we can strengthen agility, responsiveness and cross-divisional engagement.

The scope of the Secretariat programmes is too broad and requires more focused and coherent programming. To be relevant to member countries and responsive to their requests, the Secretariat is trying to be ‘all things’ for all members. This means work is often ‘reactive’ rather than proactive, and interventions cannot be scaled because of a lack of focused resources. There is insufficient clarity regarding our unique value proposition and comparative advantage.

Findings

The issue of prioritisation has been raised in strategic, programme and project evaluations. Both the *Evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2013/14-2017/18* (Haruna and Kane 2017) and the *Mid-term Review of the Current Strategic Plan* (Mills and Sklan 2020) highlighted that the size of the portfolio is not commensurate with the Secretariat’s resources. The *Democracy Programme Evaluation* (PAI, 2018) highlighted that we need to be more proactive and ground interventions in national-level analysis and prioritisation. The *Economic Development Evaluation* (International Economics Consulting Ltd (IECL), 2020) recommended the Secretariat should improve the prioritisation of work. *The Hubs and Spokes (Trade) Project Evaluation* (Commonwealth Secretariat 2020) recommended that the Secretariat prioritises areas where there is a need for highly specialised technical expertise. The *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Project Evaluation* (IOD PARC, 2020), meanwhile, expressed concern about unrealistic expectations set by donors; and the *Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH) Evaluation* (International Financial Consulting Ltd (IFCL), 2021) highlighted how lack of resources was causing a trade-off between breadth and depth of projects, hampering scaling up. Several country evaluations (for example, the *Guyana and Grenada Country Evaluations*) also noted lack of prioritisation as an obstacle for deeper impact.

Besides, the learning action group reflected on challenges concerning prioritisation relating to Extra Budgetary Resources (EBR) provided to the Secretariat by members for specific activities. In this case, priority setting is likely to 'follow the money' and be strongly driven by the donor rather than the Secretariat. The group felt we should reflect on how we could strengthen our confidence in influencing donors and supporting a Commonwealth-wide perspective on priorities. To increase this confidence in negotiating with partners, colleagues felt it was important to clearly define our comparative advantage and core work and develop a clear policy on EBRs.

The learning action group highlighted how better perspectives on which other organisations were present in-country or working on an issue could support prioritisation and decision-making. Here, we could be a partner rather than the primary delivery agent. Greater internal co-ordination among staff was also important, as it was often difficult to understand which colleagues were working in which countries. More opportunities for internal consultation and communications were needed.

At the organisation level, the Secretariat stressed the need for agreeable criteria on prioritisation during the evidence review and consultation phase ahead of the development of the new Strategic Plan. It has proposed consolidating disparate projects into more coherent and connected programmes. An example of prioritisation at the project level is evidenced by the Secretariat response to the *End of Term Review of the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender Equality* (PAI, 2016) recommendation on the need to scale down areas for engagement. The Secretariat agreed with women's affairs ministers and national women machineries to four key priority areas.

The learning action group identified good practice concerning prioritisation. In particular, following the COVID-19 crisis, the international policy team was able to rapidly adapt its work programme to issues of concern of member countries, such as medical supplies and food supply chains, as well as access to vaccines for least developed countries. We should see how we can strengthen this agility.

Recommendations

Organisationally, we should take the opportunity of the new Strategic Plan to focus on areas in which we have a comparative advantage. Areas of comparative advantage emerging from the evaluations include convening power, thought leadership, ability to share information and best practice among member countries, technical expertise in niche areas, and knowledge of small and other vulnerable states. We should also adopt clear prioritisation criteria for the allocation of resources and trade-offs between portfolio areas.

Individual programme teams should apply prioritisation criteria to programme development and at the baselining stage, carefully considering assumptions to ascertain which interventions are more likely to deliver impact. Prioritisation should also be reflected as a desired outcome and as a skill at the level of individual work plans.

The action group made several helpful recommendations in relation to prioritisation. These included:

- introducing foresight/horizon scanning functions at directorate level to inform prioritisation and baselining ahead of work commencing in particular areas;
- increasing agility and responsiveness in real time; and
- reintroducing practices such as checklists and questionnaires to gauge political will.

The group also wanted to see increased opportunities for engagement and cross-divisional learning, for example through regular and structured Senior Management Group discussions, increased knowledge management applications and opportunities for informal learning, for example, brown-bag sessions.

Lesson #2: Sustainability

We could improve sustainability by analysing assumptions and through better use of baselining in programme design. All activities, including training, should sit within a wider or longer-term plan and should only be undertaken when member countries demonstrate commitment.

Sustainability was one of the issues most frequently highlighted in evaluations. The design of the Secretariat's interventions does not adequately address sustainability from the outset, nor is it reflected upon consistently during delivery. Secretariat interventions seldom include a consolidation phase. Combined with weak monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) practices and inconsistent alignment with national development plans, this hampers the achievement of long-term impact.

Findings

The *Mid-term Review of the Current Strategic Plan* (Mills and Sklan 2020) found that the demand-driven nature of member state requests for Secretariat support led to a fragmented and somewhat ad hoc programme portfolio. The short-term nature and small size of projects tended to deliver outputs (e.g. number of people trained), but not outcomes. Interventions tended to come to an end once Secretariat funding was exhausted. The *Grenada and Papua New Guinea Country Evaluations* (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2019) highlighted how expert-led Secretariat initiatives often lost momentum when the expert left. Training and networking events were often used as modes of delivery by the Secretariat, but target groups were often not provided follow-up support, and change was not monitored.

In the *Economic Development Programme Evaluation* (IECL, 2020), a common view expressed in-country was that sustainability did not appear to be a strong focus for the Secretariat. Even in longer-term programmes, where advisers had been embedded in-country, these often ended up filling in resource gaps, rather than addressing capacity building of existing resources.

The *CVE Project Evaluation* (IOD PARC 2020) highlighted that an exit strategy and sustainability plan were not included in the strategy from the outset. The *CCFAH Project Evaluation* (IFCL, 2021) found embedding capacity in host government ministries was heavily dependent on absorptive capacity and there was inconclusive evidence on longer-term institutional change. There was evidence of a more thoughtful approach to sustainability in the CCFAH evaluation, but processes for exit, as well as records and documentation, could be improved.

The learning action group highlighted that the turnover of officials in member countries was another challenge for sustainability. As individuals in member countries frequently change portfolio, we need to see how we can further embed our work in the structures of government to make sure projects are carried forward by host institutions once direct support is withdrawn.

In the most recent evaluations, there is evidence of lesson learning in relation to sustainability. For example, compared to the Hubs and Spokes project, the CCFAH project has strengthened processes for the transfer of knowledge. The Secretariat has also been experimenting with models, such as the Blue Charter, that enable and empower member

countries to learn from each other as part of a coalition of the willing. The Secretariat is exploring how it can 'assess' sustainability more robustly in the programme design phase and monitor it effectively through key performance indicators.

The learning action group mentioned that long-term and deeper relationship building can embed sustainability. The practice of in-country focal points, which was disestablished, was helpful and its re-introduction should be further explored. Developing memoranda of understanding with institutions, setting parameters on what the Secretariat and the institution would be able to achieve together is another way to drive sustainability from the outset.

In the context of initiatives like the Connectivity agenda or the Blue Charter, leveraging the role of chairs and champions is an opportunity to further sustainability and long-term relationship building, though where issues are politically sensitive, the role of member countries needs to be carefully considered. Collaboration among networks and between Commonwealth networks as well as Commonwealth partners could be further explored.

Recommendations

We should increase the sustainability of our programming to achieve long-term change in our programme design, particularly in the analysis of assumptions and baselining. Criteria could be developed to assess requests. Countries' national development plans should guide which interventions we support. Activities should only be undertaken if the member country demonstrates commitment. Activities should also sit within a wider plan, with follow-up support to enable countries with limited resources and technical expertise to implement necessary change. We should only provide training if it is an integral part of a longer-term programme of assistance.

We need to explore how we can best develop relationships with institutions and leverage their commitment. We should be more thoughtful about the mix of interventions and the investment required for relationship building and in-country engagement. The re-establishment of in-country focal points could be explored.

Lesson #3: Link with national development plans and priorities

In our interventions, we need to improve links to member country priorities and plans. This could be achieved by developing country frameworks, improving co-ordination in-country, perhaps by re-establishing country focal points, and by including visibility initiatives.

The Secretariat's work was generally seen to be relevant to member countries. However, there was often a disconnect between Secretariat programming and a member country's national development plan. Because the Secretariat did not consistently use country strategies or frameworks to guide programming, there was ambiguity about priorities. Often the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was supposed to be the primary contact point and gateway for engagement, did not have a full picture of Secretariat programmes in-country or was bypassed when new programmes were developed. The Secretariat's interventions are relevant to member countries' needs but in-country interventions are not always integrated into a framework and theory of change for that country. This means opportunities for synergies and coherence are lost.

Findings

The Hubs and Spokes Project Evaluation (Commonwealth Secretariat 2020) highlighted how there was a need for trade adviser assignments to be well integrated into local institutions and aligned with national and/or regional trade priorities and activities. In the *Sierra Leone Country Evaluation* (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020), the Secretariat's

initial interventions had an alignment with national priorities, but this was lost after the Ebola crisis. The Secretariat's programming did not then fully adapt to changing priorities.

The learning action group discussion highlighted the disestablishment of focal points as a challenge and something that ought to be re-considered. Changes in government following elections also posed a challenge, as often projects had to be stalled or delayed when there was a change in administration and country priorities. The learning action group also highlighted the challenge posed by many vacancies in the regional desks of the political team, highlighting gaps in-country expertise.

There is evidence that alignment with national priorities has improved. At the project level, the CCFAH (IFCL, 2021) and the CVE evaluations (IODPARC, 2020) found interventions aligned with member countries needs and priorities. There have also been attempts to respond to emerging situations, i.e. The Gambia re-joining the Commonwealth and good offices intervention in Cameroon. As part of the system integration project, we are also establishing countries as data assets to ensure better tracking and understanding of country relevant information. The practice of developing country reports has also been embedded within the Secretariat. However, we have not fully explored the feasibility of developing country frameworks (along with monitoring frameworks) for all 54 member countries.

In relation to the risks posed by elections-related changes of administrations, the learning action group highlighted the importance of the engagement of expert political staff in the Secretariat in the inception phase of a project. Substantial context analysis can also enable understanding of the national context.

Visibility is important to ensure in-country stakeholders have an understanding of our work. Conferences and other dissemination/visibility opportunities could be explored. This includes engagement beyond government including with civil society, particularly in areas such as human rights, rule of law and cyber-security.

Recommendations

We should explore the most effective and efficient way to ensure that a country programme strategy or framework is developed for members, linking this the country's national development plan. This should outline how support will be delivered, the extent of local counterpart involvement and how sustainability will be ensured.

Our programme delivery in member countries should be co-ordinated both at the diplomatic level, such as ministries of foreign affairs, and at the programme level, through the ministry in charge of national planning. We should also explore the re-establishment of country focal points, and ensure political expertise is embedded in the inception phase. Visibility initiatives need to be included in the inception phase to ensure all stakeholders in countries are aware of the project and our work and impact.

Lesson #4: Measuring impact

We have made good progress on RBM and MEL. However, there is still room to progress via better organised and consistent collection of outcome data and reporting against the Strategic Plan. The Secretariat must invest sufficient time, finance and human resources into improving its evaluative capacity and culture.

In the last two strategic planning periods, the Secretariat has made significant strides in the development of results-based management (RBM). A system for monitoring, evaluation and learning is in place. However, evaluations highlight there is still scope for progress.

Evaluations noted difficulties demonstrating a direct correlation between activities/outputs/outcomes, and, ultimately, impacts on the Strategic Plan's Intermediate and Strategic Outcomes. The absence of programmatic theories of change made it difficult to identify relevant outcome measures and evaluate the contribution of our support. The Evaluation Section was also not adequately resourced. There were few follow-up mechanisms for evaluation findings and recommendations. In addition, while staff felt the organisation had clearly shifted towards RBM, the extent to which it was used for decision-making and resource allocation was still limited.

Greater levels of RBM leadership, ownership and accountability are needed across divisions. This should be supported by results-based monitoring, evaluation and reporting frameworks. The Secretariat's desired results should be clearer, and staff should be supported and rewarded for achieving them.

We should invest in building staff capacity for the understanding and utilisation of RBM. This should be further supported by a strong quality assurance mechanism. Senior management, including the Secretary-General and Deputy Secretaries-General, should actively promote RBM and its utilisation in decision-making and resource allocation.

Findings

The *Evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2013/14-2017/18* (Haruna and Kane 2017) found that greater levels of ownership and accountability for RBM are still needed. *The Mid-term Review* (Mills and Sklan 2020) of the current strategic plan emphasised the need to continue investment in and emphasis on MEL. It also highlighted the need to deepen and diversify the evidence base. *The Mid-term Review* (ibid) recommended that the Secretariat enhances project-level MEL support.

The *Democracy Programme Evaluation* (Watson 2018) highlighted that desired results should be clearer and staff should be managed and rewarded to achieve them. The *Economic Development Evaluation* (IECL, 2020) recommended that we should improve the definition of indicators for measuring outcomes and impact and adopt a programme-wide theory of change.

The *CCFAH Project Evaluation* (IFCL, 2020) found that the project MEL system was not fully integrated into programme operations, that there was limited use of reporting against log-frame indicators, and that better climate finance capacity building metrics were needed. The evaluators also found there was no standardised methodology to account for and report on the volume of climate finance funds mobilised.

Evaluations of support to The Bahamas and Sri Lanka emphasised the need for us to continue to develop the capacity of staff on RBM and MEL. The country evaluations for Guyana and Grenada suggested that the lack of country-level theory of change for country-level interventions hampered the achievement of impact.

We have taken on board recommendations in relation to strengthening results-based management, monitoring evaluation and learning. Examples include the institution of management responses for all evaluations and the tracking of the implementation of evaluation recommendations. Ahead of the next Strategic Plan, we are looking to introduce a reduced and more standardised set of indicators. We will also increase support for MEL at the programme level, as well as guidance for evidence collection.

Recommendations

Our monitoring and evaluation system needs to be more systematic, with consistent collection of information and reporting against the Strategic Plan. Directors/Heads need

to take greater responsibility and accountability for MEL. There should be an evaluation cycle mapped against the Strategic Plan.

Programmes should have evaluation frameworks, while reporting frameworks need to be more fit for their purpose. Country reports need to be produced regularly and country-level data/information collection should be part of monitoring and evaluation. The Secretariat should consider when a full-blown evaluation is not required, and where internal reviews or small scale evaluability assessments may be more cost effective as the programme proceeds through implementation.

We must invest sufficient time, finance and human resources into MEL and the Evaluation Section. We need to clarify the role of the evaluation function, while consideration should be given to making it an independent unit. We should establish peer review committees to oversee evaluations.

Lesson #5: Working together internally and externally

We must improve co-operation across divisions, for example via cross-divisional communities of practice. We should further develop and share good practice on strategic partnerships to increase influence and leverage funding.

The Secretariat's work was found to be siloed and did not take advantage of internal synergies and cross-directorate expertise. There is also the potential to optimise partnerships, both internal and external. Secretariat staff tended to work in silos. This resulted in programming often being unco-ordinated and, at its worst, competitive. Opportunities for co-ordination, dialogue and mutual support were missed. The Secretariat lacked a 'whole-of-organisation' view of the activities taking place in a certain member state or region.

Working in partnership with other development actors was found to deliver good value for money. In instances where the Secretariat had influenced change in member states, its work had often been complemented by other development actors.

Findings

The *Evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2013/14-2017/18* (Haruna and Kane 2017) recommended that we put in place an incentives system to encourage interdisciplinary working and to break down organisational siloes. It also advised introducing improved mechanisms for sharing budgets, implementing regular cross-divisional Senior Management Group meetings, and seizing opportunities for integration and synergies between similar areas. *The Mid-term Review* (Mills and Sklan 2020) of the current Strategic Plan recommended increased support to project teams to continue building partnerships.

The *Democracy Programme Evaluation* (Watson 2018) recommended that we leverage further co-operation with both other Commonwealth organisations and local and regional actors. The *Economic Development Evaluation* (IECL, 2020) recommended our partnership team should identify fund-raising measures, including stronger joint programming with partners. The *Hub and Spokes Project Evaluation* (Commonwealth Secretariat 2020) underscored the need for trade advisers to work better together. The *CCFAH Evaluation* (IFCL, 2021) stated the programme required dedicated staff to focus on fundraising and partnerships to meet the current resource gap.

The *Grenada Country Evaluation* (Commonwealth Secretariat 2020) highlighted that inter-divisional co-ordination opportunities were missed during the development and implementation of the resilience governability framework in small states. The *Sierra*

Leone Country Evaluation (Commonwealth Secretariat 2020) advised us to strengthen co-ordination with other donors.

Further to our new partnership strategy, adopted in the current Strategic Plan, we have developed several new collaborations and a system-wide partnership with the United Nations. A review of the strategy's implementation found evidence of good practice within certain teams. But there were no mechanisms to share this good practice. The *CVE Evaluation* (IOD PARC, 2020) found we pursued a diverse set of influential partnerships. It noted, however, that these were mostly reactive rather than strategic.

Recommendations

We must increase collaboration across our divisions. Country co-operation/agreement frameworks should be developed, based on national priority areas to effectively co-ordinate programming. These should be flexible and adapted as needed. We should establish cross-divisional communities of practice and mechanisms for jointly designing, assessing and implementing programmes. We could also explore internal support and peer review mechanisms; the establishment of budget incentives for joint initiatives; and the inclusion of strategic and country priorities in staff work plans.

The Secretariat should develop strategic partnerships and seek additional funding to leverage its value addition. We could also increase co-ordination with other Commonwealth organisations, donors, local and regional actors, and the media to identify opportunities for partnerships. The partnership strategy review made several recommendations regarding leadership and strategy, systems and processes, skills and support, partnership culture and resource mobilisation. Staff felt they could gain from public-private partnerships. However, these should be substantial to justify investment of staff time. They recommended the development a strong framework for assessing conflicts of interest, particularly in engaging with the private sector.

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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