

Mid-Term Review Of The Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25

Final Report

October 2024



The Commonwealth

EVALUATION SERIES 124

Mid-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25

Final Report
October 2024



The Commonwealth

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CCFAH	Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub
CFTC	Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation
CHOGM	Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
COMSEC	Commonwealth Secretariat Fund
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSET	Commonwealth Sustainable Energy Transition
CYP	Commonwealth Youth Programme
DRF	Detailed Results Framework
EBRs	External Budgetary Resources
EU	European Union
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FGD	focus group discussion
HC	High Commission
HR	human resources
IT	information technology
KII	key informant interview
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MEL	monitoring, evaluation and learning
MOU	memorandum of understanding
MTR	Mid-Term Review
PDD	Project Design Document
PSD	Programme Strategy Document
QPR	Quarterly Progress Review
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound
SMC	Senior Management Committee
SPPDD	Strategy, Portfolio, Partnership and Digital Directorate
SRF	Strategic Results Framework
STI	Science, Technology and Innovation
TOC	theory of change
TOR	Terms of Reference
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UVP	unique value proposition

Executive Summary

With the mid-point of the Strategic Plan 2020/21–2024/25 having been reached in June 2023, the Strategy, Portfolio, Partnership and Digital Directorate (SPPDD) of the Commonwealth Secretariat commissioned an independent Mid-Term Review (MTR), which commenced in July 2023. The MTR engaged participants within the Secretariat's management, programme and corporate functions and also High Commissions representing member countries.

The MTR found evidence of strong progress in delivering the 13 intermediate outcomes prioritised under the Strategic Plan. This finding was based on indicator information within the Detailed Results Framework as well as internal reporting compiled in the Secretariat's Annual Results Report. Of the targets for intermediate outcome indicators, 96 per cent had either been exceeded, been met, were on target or were seeing good progress.

This result has been realised through the implementation of a substantial portfolio of 44 projects spread across the breadth of the four-pillared Strategic Plan. This is notwithstanding an increasingly uncertain financial outlook, owing largely to declining contributions to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC). Performance indicators, however, do not sufficiently capture or describe the outcomes being achieved. Measuring achievements on strategic outcomes and emerging impact is a persistent challenge noted in previous evaluations. The organisational Theory of Change (TOC) assumes strong progress on intermediate outcomes will result in achievement of the strategic outcomes. However, to validate this assumption by evidencing impact will require a more structured approach to defining and collecting the required data at each result level and clarifying the causal relationship from inputs to outputs to outcomes to impact.

The MTR recognised the value of current organisational procedures and measures to support the Secretariat's planning, budgeting, monitoring and results reporting. The Secretariat has structured and detailed mechanisms in place to facilitate its planning processes. Planning at the three levels of strategy, delivery and projects provides good information for member countries

on how the Secretariat is responding to its mandates. The planning structure is top-down but is responsive to the needs of member countries and flexible in the face of emerging changes in the global and national development contexts.

Partnerships, communications, innovation and human resource (HR) development are critical organisational enablers for the implementation of the Strategic Plan. The Secretariat has drawn upon existing and new partnerships to support the delivery of the Plan. These have enabled the Secretariat to extend the reach of its programmes, particularly in delivering technical assistance. The Secretariat can build on this progress through strengthening the partnership function and streamlining processes to increase efficiency and effectiveness in resource mobilisation.

Communications and HR development emerged as strong themes in the MTR. A snap assessment of the Secretariat's Communications function in 2020 encouraged the Secretariat to develop a communications strategy and prioritise internal and external communications in its planning. Key areas of progress were observed at the mid-term, including in content production, digital communication management and staffing of the Communications section. Efforts to improve human resourcing and associated processes were also evident. Staff posts approved experienced an increase in 2021 compared with earlier years, and average time to hire for vacant posts decreased substantially. Resource constraints and initial post-Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting administrative bottlenecks have meant the vacancy rate has been higher than the targeted 10 per cent.

Other factors affecting HR outcomes were the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery challenges, the cost-of-living crisis, a lack of pay rises and limited career development prospects. The HR division has taken several measures to address staff health and wellbeing, and these have been well received, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Nonetheless, funding constraints have limited the ability of the Secretariat to develop its talent pool. This has likely affected the efficiency of implementation of the Strategic Plan.

The Secretariat has a high approved direct budget utilisation rate, averaging 93 per cent over the strategic period so far. However, the budget is based on member countries' pledged voluntary contributions and the Secretariat's expectations that these will be collected in line with previous years. However, a substantial decline in CFTC pledges and contributions has reduced the scope and depth of activities and limited the number of member countries that are able to benefit from Secretariat assistance. The approach of having Annual Delivery Plans, coupled with the gap between budgeted income and actual pledged funds received, also results in reduced time for implementation and an inability to sustain interventions to realise deeper results.

The Secretariat's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approach has evolved over the years and significant efforts have gone into developing appropriate processes and tools. Previous evaluation reports evidence clear indicators of progress. However, the Secretariat's MEL system has not sufficiently adapted to the changing operating context, particularly the realities of diminished budgets. MEL and reporting are resource-intensive and appear to be complicated. In its current form, MEL does not sufficiently provide SMART measures of outcome and support to decision-making, policies and practices. Impact and strategic outcomes measures are not defined and captured. Learning processes are viewed as silo-based and ad hoc and there are gaps between learning around delivery, decision-making and the generation of outcomes. Although the Secretariat has dedicated a great deal of effort to elaborate and detailed reporting, there are a number of crucial reporting gaps covering the achievement of strategic outcomes, impact, lessons learnt and challenges. These reporting gaps are of particular concern to member countries and have contributed to a perceived lack of transparency.

The MTR has identified a range of recommended actions for the Secretariat to consider to address the identified challenges and build on the progress achieved in the Strategic Plan to date.

The Secretariat can improve the effectiveness of its planning and portfolio management by providing internal guidance on how mandates are defined for the purpose of planning, developing a framework and procedural mechanism to guide programme teams in the prioritisation of projects

and clearly communicate these internally and to Board members. The financing of the Strategic Plan can be improved through a streamlined and efficient process for resource mobilisation and partnership development. Planning effectively for results also requires a multi-year planning and budgeting process.

To strengthen the evidence around the outcomes and impact of the Strategic Plan, the Secretariat should streamline and better embed the use of its impact pathways; review its Detailed Results Framework to improve the adequacy of its indicators on the intermediate outcomes; update the organisational and Strategic Plan TOC; simplify MEL tools; streamline reporting to reduce the burden on staff; and improve the value of monitoring and evaluation information use for learning and decision-making.

The Secretariat should build on efforts to improve communications through more regular and structured engagement with staff and a stronger approach to stakeholder engagement. Internally, succinct and transparent communication will encourage coherence across programmes and empower staff to manage effectively. Simultaneously, improving staff engagement will underscore the value of the Secretariat's talents in delivering the Strategic Plan.

Externally, the good work by the Secretariat must be made known to the wider public in a creative manner using innovative technologies and available platforms. The Secretariat's external communications can be boosted through streamlining the messaging on the organisation's value proposition at the country level and in the thematic areas of focus in the Strategic Plan. A clear strategy would facilitate better buy-in among member country governments and Commonwealth citizens, who are both funders and beneficiaries of the Strategic Plan.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 has been implemented against a backdrop of major global challenges and crisis including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, growing conflict and social unrest in many countries, and increasing evidence of a worsening climate crisis. As Commonwealth countries have grappled to respond, the period since 2021 has seen a sharp loss of jobs, reduced livelihoods, shrinking and slowing economies, and global supply chain challenges. The pandemic and recovery have widened existing inequalities and the response effort has also deteriorated debt statistics and pushed back the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for many countries.¹ Within a global context of significant economic, social and environmental challenges, the needs of member countries and the competition for development and climate change response funding have risen sharply over the last three years.

The Strategic Plan acknowledges these challenges and the risks they pose to achieving the targets. The Plan comprises four strategic outcomes, 11 intermediate outcomes, two crosscutting outcomes and three catalytic outcomes.

With the mid-point of the Strategic Plan having been reached in June 2023, the Strategy, Portfolio, Partnership and Digital Directorate (SPPDD) commissioned a Mid-Term Review (MTR), which commenced on 20 July 2023. The MTR is an integral part of the Commonwealth Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approach and the Commonwealth Secretariat's Evaluation Plan for 2021/22–2024/25 that has been approved by the Board of Governors. It is expected to:

- Provide credible, evidence-based assessment of the Strategic Plan at its mid-point;
- Contribute to learning, performance improvement, planning and decision-making;
- Reinforce the organisational results-oriented culture;
- Support transparency and accountability in the Commonwealth.

1.2 Purpose and scope

The **purpose** of the MTR, in line with the Terms of Reference (TOR) (Annex A), is to:

- **Assess progress (from 2021 to 2023) in the achievements of the intermediate, crosscutting and enabling outcomes of the Detailed Results Framework (DRF), a monitoring tool for the performance of the Strategic Plan, which is reflective in nature; and**
- **Provide clear strategic and operational recommendations to improve the Secretariat's planning, prioritisation and overall performance over the second half of the strategic period from 2024 to 2025, which is forward-looking in nature.**

The **scope** of the MTR was discussed and refined in the inception phase of the review to:

1. Assess progress towards achievements of **intermediate outcomes** from 2021 to 2023;
2. Synthesise the **organisation's performance** in planning, delivery and MEL;
3. Review progress in implementation of the Strategic Plan Evaluation recommendations (for 2017/18–2020/21), particularly **key milestones** to be achieved by the mid-term;
4. Review the **relevance and effectiveness of the Secretariat's impact pathways** (including in articulating achievements of strategic outcomes at organisational and programme levels);
5. Review the organisation's **approaches to planning and criteria for prioritisation and resource reallocations** to propose practical options for management consideration;

¹ For further reading on the impact of COVID-19 on Commonwealth member countries please refer to Wignaraja et al. (2021), Commonwealth Secretariat (2022a) and Osman and Keevy (2022). This context is summarised in Annex 6.

Table 1.1. Strategic Plan 2021/22—2024/25: Strategic Results Framework

	Democracy and Governance	Sustainable Development	Resilience and Climate Action	Small and Other Vulnerable States
Strategic outcomes	Greater adherence to Commonwealth values and principles and advancement of good governance	Sustainable and inclusive economic and social development	Climate-resilient and low-carbon development to respond to climate and ocean emergencies	Small and other vulnerable states' needs and concerns addressed in global governance
Intermediate outcomes	1.1 Member countries effectively utilise mechanisms to further adherence of Commonwealth values and principles ¹ 1.2 Member countries conduct fair, credible and inclusive elections 1.3 Public institutions and frameworks in member countries strengthened to promote rule of law, access to justice, human rights and good governance	2.1 Effective trade policy, increased competitiveness and co-operation 2.2 Sustainable public finance and debt management 2.3 Sustainable, equitable, transparent and effective management, governance and use of the ocean, energy and natural resources 2.4 Inclusive and resilient education and health systems	3.1 Enhanced intra-Commonwealth co-operation on sustainable ocean action and energy transition 3.2 Enhanced access to financial resources, technology and capacities for climate change adaptation and mitigation	4.1 Policy positions advanced in global governance mechanisms 4.2 Reduced vulnerability to shocks and improved fiscal sustainability and access to financing
Cross-cutting	CC1. Effective participation and equal opportunities for youth in leadership, governance, economic and social development enhanced CC2. Gender disparities in access to political, social and economic rights and violence against women and girls reduced			
Organisational enablers	CI. Enhanced use of technology, innovation and digitalisation CII. Delivery through co-creative partnerships increased CIII. Dynamic risk management approach institutionalised			

¹ Mechanisms include the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) and the Commonwealth Good Offices and projects such as Countering Violent Extremism and the Value-Based Leadership Framework.

6. Propose practical options for management considerations for the second half of the strategic period.

The main **users of the MTR** will be as follows.

- The Commonwealth Secretariat Board of Governors provides oversight to strategic planning and implementation and the MTR

provides an account of progress on realising the Strategic Plan outcomes agreed by member countries.

- The Senior Management Committee (SMC) validates and accepts the MTR and prepares Management Response Actions to implement agreed recommendations.

- Section heads and programme teams of the Secretariat reflect on the findings and lessons to adapt programme management and inform forward planning.
- SPPDD commissioned the MTR and will ensure its findings are communicated widely. Further, SPPDD, as custodian of planning, monitoring and evaluation processes, utilises the lessons identified to strengthen the organisational approach.
- The MTR findings are also of interest to national agencies in member countries and Commonwealth and other partner organisations that collaborate with, co-implement or co-facilitate projects and support the implementation of the Strategic Plan through their own actions.

2. Methodology

The evaluation utilised a primarily qualitative approach, reflecting the nature of the underlying data. This was a hybrid evaluation, using both remote and in-person interviews and meetings. The methods used are summarised below; Annex C provides further details.

A participatory and utilisation-focused approach to the review was facilitated through collaboration with SPPDD's Evaluation team and the Evaluation Reference Group, comprising representatives of the Secretariat's programme directorates. Regular weekly meetings were established with the Evaluation team, which sought to ensure that the review process and reporting were responsive to the needs of the primary users.

2.1 Document review

The Secretariat provided access to documentation including previous evaluations, strategic planning documents, programme strategies, project plans and performance reports, financial information, and organisation policies and procedures. Annex 4 provides a list of references and documents reviewed. A total of 47 documents were reviewed.

2.2 Primary data collection

The consultants conducted semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) to obtain views across a range of stakeholders. Annex B presents the data collection tools used. A target of 50 interviewees, set during the inception period, was surpassed substantially. A total of 128 stakeholders participated in the MTR, including SMC members (six), High Commission (HC) members including Board of Governors and staff (15) and Secretariat staff including section heads and advisers and staff from SPPDD and corporate services (107). The gender breakdown of participants was close to parity, with 65 women and 63 men participating. Annex F provides an anonymous list of KIIs and FGDs carried out.

2.3 Analytical process

Data collected was analysed in two stages. The first stage focused on analysis of each individual dataset and included the coding according to the evaluation questions (see Annex 8) and emerging themes. The second stage sought to triangulate findings emerging from different datasets and data sources. At this stage, additional evidence requirements and clarification needs were identified and, where available, applied to support findings.

2.4 Limitations

Time and resource constraints meant the consultants did not engage with government officials who are directly involved in the Secretariat's activities and projects, as initially discussed during the inception phase. This gap was partially mitigated through interviews with HCs that represent member countries on the Board of Governors as well as through secondary reporting from the Secretariat's Evaluation team, who were simultaneously conducting country evaluations. However, omission of the views of implementation partners on the ground in member countries will likely have had a bearing on findings.

Interviews extended from September 2023 until late November 2023, in response to stakeholder availabilities. This resulted in a longer-than-expected timeline for gathering data. The Consultant Team, with the support of SPPDD, remained as flexible as possible to mitigate the situation. Some data-gathering took place in parallel to the analysis and drafting of findings.

3. Findings

In response to the MTR's purpose, this chapter discusses progress in the implementation of the Strategic Plan. It first examines progress in the achievements of the intermediate, crosscutting and enabling outcomes then explores operational and enabling factors in line with the evaluation questions. These factors include planning, MEL processes, communications, HR, and partnership and innovations. This will enable the next chapter to propose foundations for strategic and operational recommendations for the implementation of the second half of the Strategic Plan.

3.1 Progress in the achievements of expected outcomes

To assess progress in the achievement of outcomes, the MTR relied heavily on available monitoring information in the Secretariat's Annual Results Reports. This information was supplemented through interviews with the SPPDD Evaluation team, drawing on emerging findings from ongoing country evaluations, as well as with programme teams and with HCs. The MTR did not have the scope and opportunity to identify or validate outcomes beyond these sources.

3.1.1 Detailed Results Framework

The Strategic Plan's DRF enables the Secretariat to report on its progress in delivering the Strategic Plan. It includes indicators against the intermediate, crosscutting and enabling outcomes, with baselines and annual targets and updates. The 13 outcome statements contained therein represent the high-level objectives of programmes being delivered by the Secretariat. Each programme has a developed Strategy contained in a Programme Strategy Document (PSD) and executed through projects, described in Project Design Document (PDDs) (see Portfolio in Annex D). Annex E contains the full list of DRF outcomes, indicators and their statuses at the end of June 2023.

3.1.2 Strategic outcomes and impact

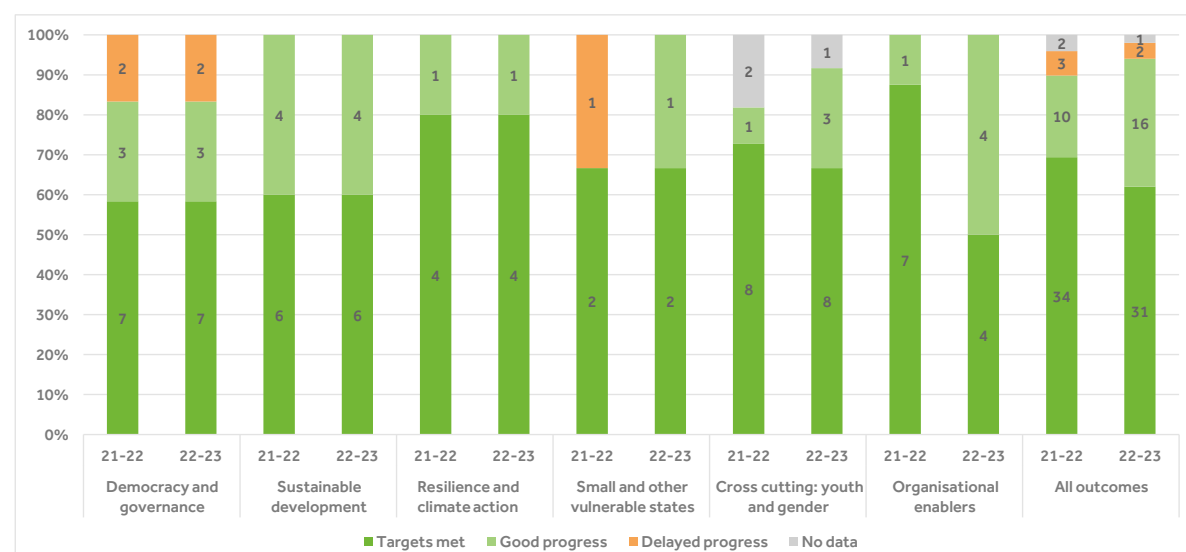
The Strategic Plan (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2022h) assumes that strategic outcomes are achieved in the long term through the realisation and sustaining of intermediate outcomes.

The Secretariat's Annual Results Report in 2023 reported that 96 per cent of targets for intermediate outcomes either had been exceeded, had been met, were on target or had seen good progress. This progress, which is in line with the trend for intermediate outcome indicators over the past 10 years, bodes well for the realisation of strategic outcomes. However, the Strategic Results Framework (SRF) does not include mechanisms to systematically measure the sustained achievements of outcomes or to assess impact. Further, the MTR did not find evidence that the assumptions of causality linking intermediate to strategic outcomes were being tested or validated.

Some attempts to capture strategic outcomes and even impacts of the Secretariat's engagements at the country level are on-going as part of the country evaluations; reports on these are expected in 2024. The country evaluations cover a wider time scope than the MTR and are inclusive of projects implemented in the previous Strategic Plan. As the country evaluations were at an early stage, findings were preliminary and limited evidence was available to the MTR on the strategic outcomes and impact of the current Strategic Plan.

Despite the lack of sufficient information on strategic outcomes, a number of HC interviewees shared the view that the good quality expertise provided by the Secretariat in many areas did lead to the achievement of strategic outcomes. Among activities highlighted by HC interviewees is the work on the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH), which mobilised US\$310.41 million in climate financing for 12 countries (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023c). The Secretariat's longstanding support to the conduct of fair, credible and inclusive elections through election observation missions and full-cycle election support were also highlighted as impactful.

The Secretariat can strengthen its monitoring and reporting on strategic outcomes and impacts, building on its current results information, through identifying more explicitly the assumptions and mechanisms linking its project activities to desired changes in member countries. Several interviewees

Figure 3.1. Progress status on intermediate outcome indicators

Source: Commonwealth Secretariat (2023b).

shared the view that clear, robust and credible reporting on impact would help member countries better reflect on the Secretariat's value proposition.

3.1.3 Progress on intermediate outcomes

According to the data presented in the Annual Results Reports for 2021/22 and 2022/23, there has been good progress towards achievement of the intermediate outcomes. The data indicates that 94 per cent of intermediate outcome indicator targets for 2022/23 either have been exceeded, have been met or have seen good progress. This builds on the 90 per cent realised for the same measure in 2021/22, the first year of the Strategic Plan (see Table 3.1). Table 3.1 also highlights that the improvement has come from a shift away from delayed progress indicators and indicators without updated measures.

The Annual Results Report for 2022/23 indicated that progress on outcomes was fairly distributed across the strategic, crosscutting and enabling

outcomes. The data suggest that, if the trend continues, all targets are likely to be achieved by the end of the Strategic Plan period (Figure 3.1).

Annex E presents the detailed list of indicators and MTR status. Under the Democracy and Governance strategic pillar, two indicators reflect delayed progress, related to support to electoral management bodies and to provision of rule of law support. Under the remaining strategic pillars – Sustainable Development, Resilience and Climate Action, and Small and Other Vulnerable States – indicators suggest overall strong progress on realising the intermediate outcome targets.

Notwithstanding the progress reported against intermediate outcome indicators, gaps in the quality and coverage of the performance indicators limits the range and depth of reporting on the intermediate outcomes. Performance indicators in the DRF did not sufficiently capture or describe the positive changes taking place as the result of the implementation of the Strategic Plan. In some countries, when data is available, the country evaluation process is identifying progress towards the achievement of intermediate outcomes. The

Table 3.1. Progress on intermediate outcomes in the current strategic period

Progress report	Target met or exceeded	Good progress/ On target	Progress delayed	No data available
2021/22	69.4%	20.4%	6.1%	4.1%
2022/23	62.0%	32.0%	4.0%	2.0%

Source: Commonwealth Secretariat (2022d, 2023b).

preliminary findings of the country evaluations highlight the long-term nature of support required to realise impact, with evidence of impact stronger against interventions from the previous Strategic Plan.

The limitations in the indicators as sufficient measures of the intermediate outcomes and the weak outcome information in Annual Results Reports contributed to divided views and a lack of clarity among stakeholders on the benefits the Strategic Plan had delivered to member countries. One HC interviewee shared:

In my view only half of the outcome have been achieved. And what did not take place is closed and then we progress to a new agenda. The staff at the Commonwealth Secretariat refused to bring it up. At least the Secretariat needs to make sure all outcomes are progressed and implemented before it is passed to the next head. If the Commonwealth

starts some projects, it must see it through right to the end. There are also some pilot projects that are not completed.

HC interviewee

The Secretariat has explained that, given the breadth of the programmes covered, the Annual Results Reports provides limited space for in-depth reporting on outcomes. Efforts to improve the clarity of information on outcomes is contained in 'impact stories' in boxes in the report. The Secretary-General's reports to the Board as well as country and other evaluation briefings and reports are also efforts to inform stakeholders on outcomes.

Summary of key findings

- The Secretariat's strategic performance framework suggests that 96 per cent of targets have been met or are progressing well at the mid-term point.

Box 1. Overview of planning process at the Secretariat

The Secretariat has a structured approach to its planning outcomes. The Strategic Plan was developed through a process involving 11 Task Teams, a mapping of the SDGs, a mapping of national development plans from 41 member countries, lessons learnt from numerous evaluative studies including the MTR and early findings from the Evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2017/18—2020/21, numerous internal and external papers and guidance from the Executive Committee and the Board of Governors. Mapping of these priorities was conducted against the perceived areas of expertise and added value from the Secretariat, to assess its mandates and strengths. In drafting the Theory of Change (TOC), consultations were held with accredited organisations and internal assessments were reviewed.

The Strategic Plan 2021/22—2024/25 attempts to address global issues by prioritising at least one global issue per strategic outcome according to paragraph 29 (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2022h). This is to be done through a global focus and aligned to a global development agenda by supporting member countries to fulfil their national contributions to the SDGs (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2022g). The Strategic Plan provides an overarching ambition and direction for the Commonwealth member countries as a whole for the duration of four years. The DRF includes results indicators with annual targets and makes reference to relevant SDGs and the Commonwealth Charter.

The Secretariat next developed 13 PSDs, to ensure the overarching mandate was customised to meet the specific needs of member countries, covering 11 intermediate outcomes and two crosscutting outcomes. Detailed planning goes into the development of the PSDs. The PSD provides details such as context and problem analysis, a programme-level TOC, a MEL plan, a workplan, a risk management assessment and a budget. The PSD also integrates crosscutting areas such as gender and youth. Programme teams are cognisant that their work contributes to address global issues, and this is reflected in the development challenge section of the context and the problem analysis.

PDDs detail the annual action plan for implementing the programme strategies.

- Emerging outcomes as evidenced in impact stories and country evaluations appear promising but measurement of and reporting on outcomes can be enhanced to provide greater rigour, credibility and clarity to results claims.
- The spread of resources across a wide portfolio means there is limited opportunity for sustaining deep changes and driving impact.

3.2 Assessment of the Secretariat's planning and MEL operations

Having discussed the progress of the outcome delivery at the mid-point of the strategic plan in the previous section, factors that enabled or constrained that progress are discussed in the next sections. First, this section assesses the planning, budgeting, MEL and reporting processes. It also reports on the implementation of actions in response to the previous strategic plan evaluations.

3.2.1 Planning for outcomes

The planning process includes milestones at which key documents are developed and approved to inform the subsequent stage of the planning. These documents, in temporal order, include:

- The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) Outcome Statement, providing the strategic organisational priorities and mandates of leaders of Commonwealth member countries;
- The Detailed Results Framework (DRF);
- Annual Delivery Plans;
- Programme Strategy Documents (PSDs); and
- the Project Design Documents (PDDs).

Programmes and projects planned are demand-driven responses to CHOGM mandates and reflect the Secretariat's resources, partnerships and organisational assets. All interviewed stakeholders acknowledged that programmes and projects were highly relevant in supporting member countries as they were closely aligned with countries' needs as a result of the planning processes. As such, the Secretariat's internal Evaluation team reported that the delivery of these projects received good support from in-country stakeholders. Interviewed HC staff were broadly supportive of the

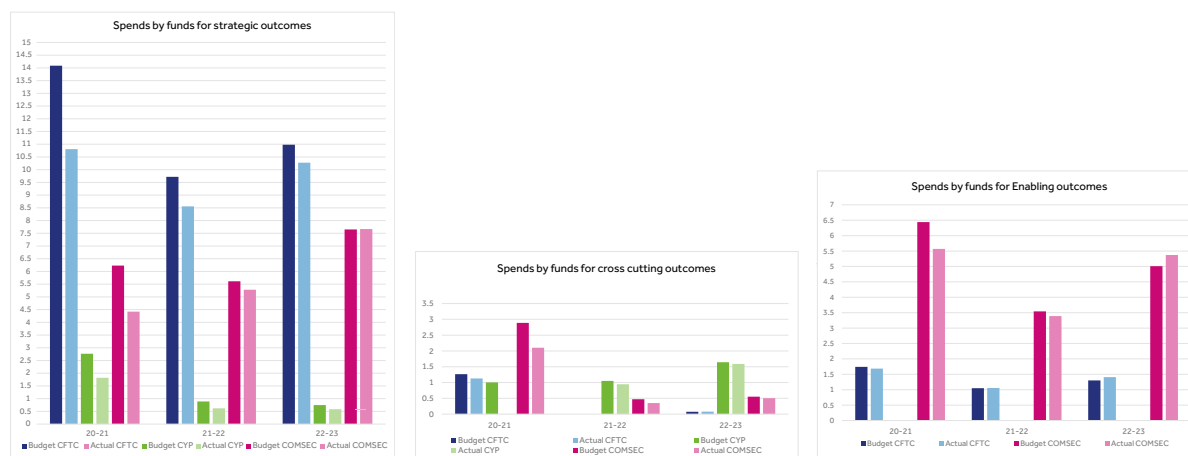
Box 2. Overview of major funds and finance processes

The Secretariat delivers the Strategic Plan and Annual Delivery Plans through finance that is sourced and managed under three funds:

- The Commonwealth Secretariat Fund (COMSEC), which consists of assessed contributions from member countries and external budgetary resources (EBRs);
- The Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), which consists of assessed contributions from member countries;
- The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), which consists of voluntary contributions including EBRs.

These three major funds are managed by the Finance section and independently audited each year, in line with International Public Sector Accounting Standards – namely, the International Standards on Auditing (UK). Based on the documentation review, the standard of accounting has remained high over the past 10 years, with Audited Financial Statements receiving unqualified opinions from auditors, representing a true and fair view of the state of affairs of respective funds. The Abuja Guidelines provide procedures for member countries that do not pay their assessed contributions to the CYP or COMSEC or have not pledged or paid into the CFTC voluntary fund. Countries that do not contribute or pledge to the CFTC for two consecutive years are not eligible for technical support from the Secretariat.

Figure 3.2. Budget utilisation by fund (£ millions)



Source: Commonwealth Secretariat Evaluation and Learning Section

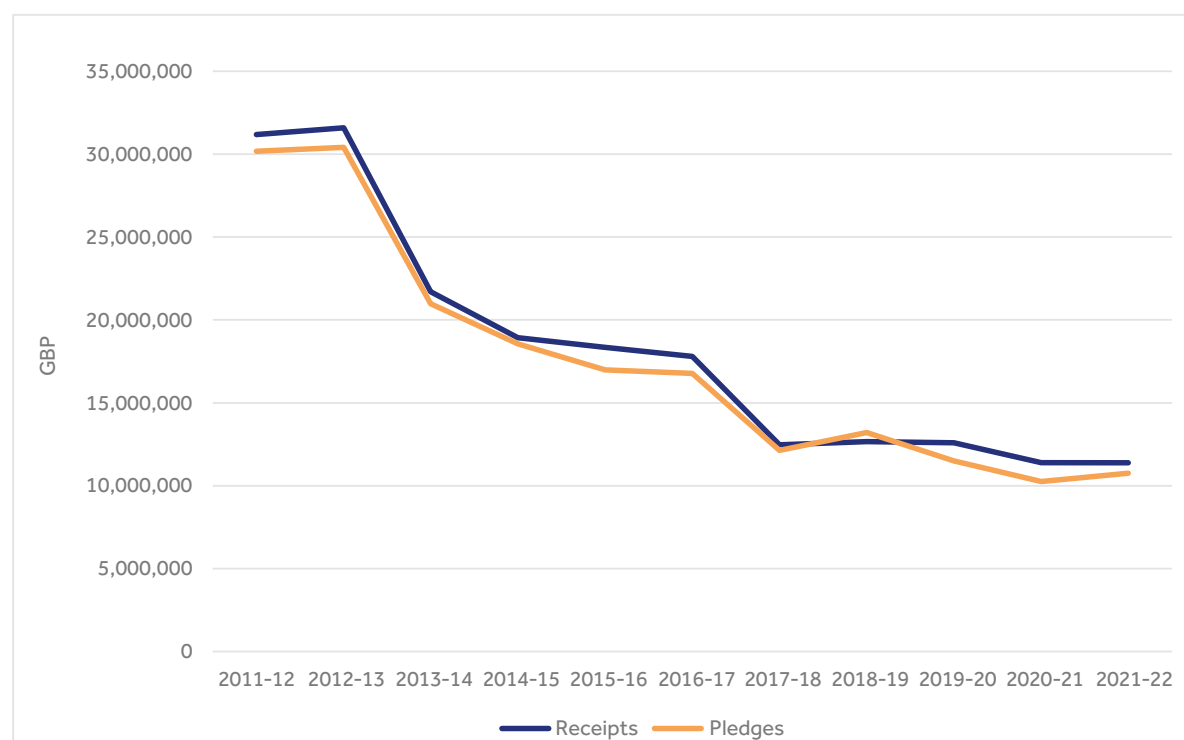
Secretariat's value proposition in these challenging times and believed it could evolve to meet the needs of member countries. The planning approach helps build consensus between what member countries need and what the Secretariat is able to deliver within the given parameters. This approach can, however, result in an overly broad plan that stretches available resources too thinly and limits the Secretariat's ability to deliver impact in some areas of work. The planning process then delivers aspirations outcomes rather than providing for

strategic delivery. Most stakeholders recognised this challenge, which has been amplified by funding declines.

3.2.2 Planning and budgeting review

The new Strategic Plan commenced in October 2021 after an extension of the previous Strategic Plan by three months. This extension accommodated the postponed CHOGM in Rwanda, to allow the outcomes to inform the strategic planning process.

Figure 3.3. CFTC receipts and pledges over the past 10 years



Source: Commonwealth Secretariat (2012a, 2014a, 2015a, 2016a, 2017a, 2018b, 2020a, 2021a, 2022e).

In achieving the above-mentioned outcomes over the two years of the strategic period to its mid-term, the Secretariat’s direct non-staff programme spend totalled £24.5 million, or 86 per cent of the budget. Direct budget utilisation on programmes in 2022/23 improved to 90 per cent from 80 per cent in 2021/22. This reflected the post-pandemic recovery and mirrored the improved outcome measures discussed above.

Box 2 provides an overview of the Commonwealth Secretariat’s three funds.

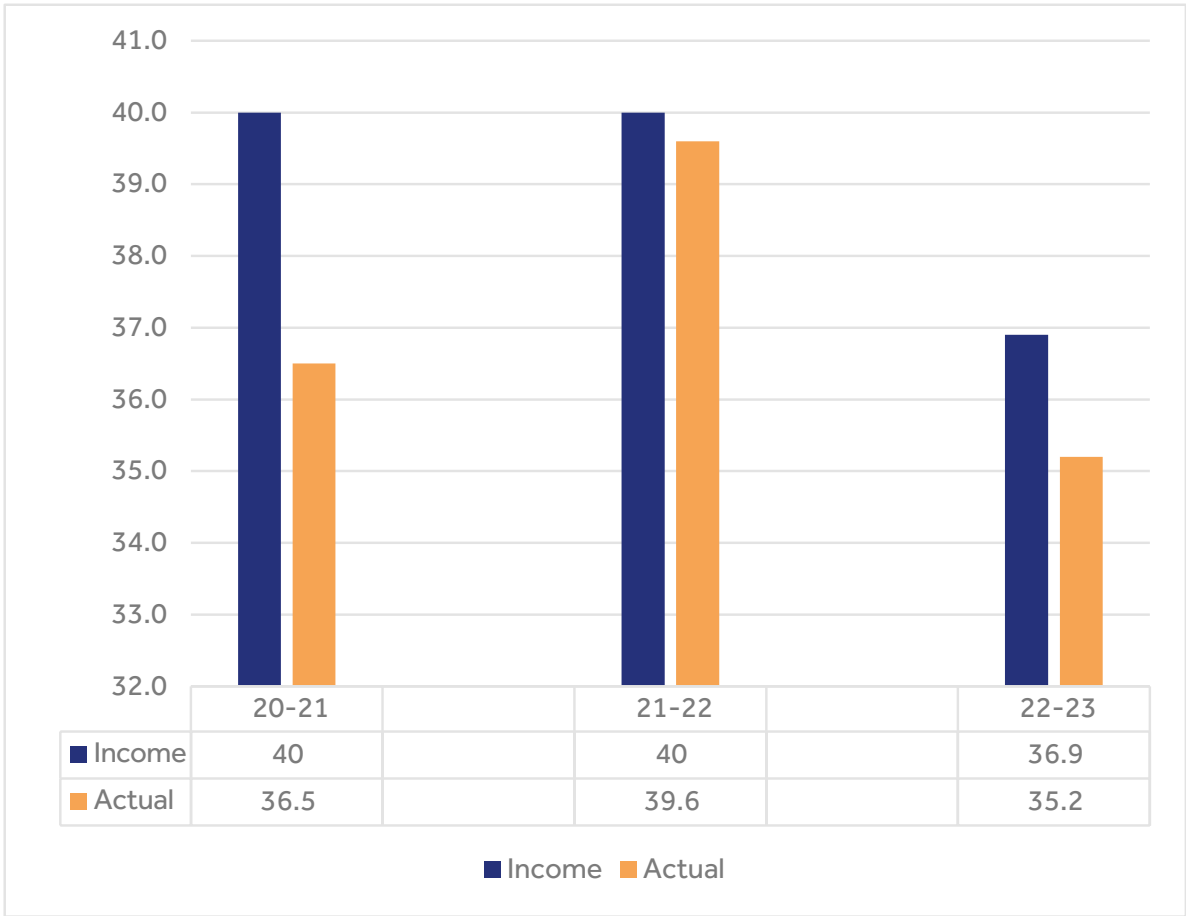
Figure 3.2 shows the distribution of the total direct spend (programme and staff) on outcomes across the three funds for the period 2020/21–2022/23. The graph illustrates the higher underspend in 2020/21 as a result of the pandemic. The CFTC spend is significantly skewed to the programme outcomes under the strategic pillars, while COMSEC supports both strategic and enabling outcomes.

The CYP fund is more clearly aligned behind crosscutting youth mainstreaming outcomes in the current strategic period, reflecting the strategic focus on mainstreaming in the current plan. The graph clearly shows the heavier dependence on the CFTC fund to deliver the Strategic Plan.

Interviews with HC from 10 member countries indicated general satisfaction with the Secretariat’s financial reporting. However, many also called for clearer reporting on the breakdown of project funds, including the fund source and the utilisation of EBRs, in the Annual Results Reports.

Budgeting reality and practices at the Secretariat significantly constrain delivery of the Strategic Plan. The budget is based on countries’ pledged contributions and the Secretariat’s expectations that these are collected in line with previous years. However, the substantial drop in the CFTC, from over £31 million in 2011/12 to 9 million in 2022/23

Figure 3.4. Total budget and actual income (£ millions)



Source: Data compiled by authors based on information at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Note: Figures are annualised, as reported in the Secretariat’s financial statements. These are not directly comparable to figures on funding to the Strategic Plan as the delayed start to this (in October 2021) led to non-alignment with the start of the financial year (in June 2021).

(Figure 3.3), has contributed to uncertainty in the planning process and re-prioritisation. This is likely to challenge the Secretariat's results-focused management approach. Programme staff reported that four-year programme strategies required significant effort to develop despite being largely unfunded beyond the first financial year of the Strategic Plan. While budgets are concluded annually, the scope of programme strategies and project plans may need to be reduced during the delivery year as income is realised and the variance with the budget becomes clear. The Secretariat is challenged in meeting countries' expectations and responding effectively to CHOGM mandates.

Total contributions (assessed and voluntary) declined from 83 per cent for financial year 2020/21 to 78 per cent in 2021/22 and 77 per cent in 2022/23 even as EBRs increased from 5.4 per cent to 8.7 per cent before falling to 6.7 per cent over the same period. Given that contributions are assessed, and voluntary pledges made, in advance of the financial year, some of the decline in contributions in 2022/23 may reflect delayed effects of the COVID-19 recovery challenges in some countries. Taking these factors into consideration, the Secretariat has reduced its expectations for income for the financial years 2022/23 and 2023/24 to reflect a lower expectation of CFTC contributions. Nonetheless, in 2022/23 the pledged income shortfall was £3.6 million, as pledges were lower than budgeted. For 2023/24, the shortfall was budgeted to be £2.4 million in the CFTC; however, as of October 2023, this was revised to £4.0 million, an increase of £1.6 million, owing to a shortfall in pledged income (Figure 3.4).

SMC and Secretariat staff interviewed highlighted challenges in setting realistic timelines in the Annual Delivery Plans. This is because of the constraint related to fitting all implementation phases within one financial year. This often reduces the timeline available for the implementation of some projects under the Annual Delivery Plans by two to three months. Preparatory steps such as pre-engaging stakeholders, scoping the project in member countries and procurement of experts further shorten the time for implementation. Staff may then rush to implement and complete projects within a certain financial year, in some cases at the expense of efficient resource use and realisation of outcomes.

The uncertainty of available funding, the mismatch between projected and actual income for programme implementation and the need for annual approval of budgets all discourage multi-year planning. Developing plans that cannot be accomplished owing to budgetary constraints is a risk that many programmes prefer to avoid. This has led to a reduction in ambition and the setting of safe indicator targets, according to Secretariat staff interviewed. This has severe impacts on the effectiveness of the delivery of intermediate outcomes, as various stakeholders in interviews shared.

We have spread ourselves so thinly and it's difficult to deliver best.

SMC member

I think it is important to have a multi-year budget. It's much better to have a full visionary process in place. Of course, if there is an issue with the budget adjustment to be made, some Board members feel more secure to look at it on an annual basis. Multilateral organisations are looking at multi-year budgets. If we had a multi-year budget, we could use the resources to focus on implementing.

SMC member

Moreover, the current approach of allocating budgets across programmes is based in the proportion of budgets allocated in previous years, therefore on precedent rather than on criteria for prioritisation. This has scope for improvement, by linking budgeting to project prioritisation. The budget enabled the implementation of 45 projects in 2021/22 and 44 in 2022/23 according to the Annual Results Reports (see Portfolio in Annex D).

EBRs have played an increased role in funding the current Strategic Plan compared with the last one, and the Secretariat has been improving its procedures for engaging with new partners. EBRs have allowed for multi-year planning and the setting of a realistic level of ambition, including targets for outcomes and impact. However, according to many (over 50 per cent) of the Secretariat's interviewed staff, EBR-funded projects still require significant supportive management and compliance with different reporting and management systems. While most of the 25 EBR projects on the Secretariat's books appear to be aligned with the Strategic Plan, the growth in the number or size of these projects risks shifting already-stretched staff resources away from Strategic Plan priorities. Substantial time is also spent by

Figure 3.5. Definition of Secretariat MEL

Monitoring	Evaluation	Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continuous process of data collection, feedback, assessment and analysis of performance that allows more informed decisions and strategies to meet expected results	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Systematic and objective assessment of on-going or completed interventions to assess performance, identify lessons and inform strategic decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Captures actions, processes and systems that support and enables generation and embedding of knowledge into improved practices, policies and performance

Source: Commonwealth Secretariat (2018c).

programme staff, including advisers, on securing EBRs. However, there are gaps in Secretariat financial guidance on EBRs, such as on accounting for the cost of developing EBRs by Secretariat staff and sponsorship possibilities with private sector companies.

The budgetary planning for the delivery of the Strategic Plan was further complicated by the political and operational characteristics of the organisational planning process. Programme planning was informed by the organisational mandates. However, the definition of ‘mandates’ was a point of disagreement among interviewed stakeholders. Politically, some stakeholders recognised only mandates coming from CHOGM; others define ‘mandates’ as coming from Ministerial Meetings and other requests. More than 50 per cent of interviewed SMC members and programme staff mentioned that the ‘chasing of mandates’ sometimes took place at the start of strategic planning periods and planning for the Annual Delivery Plans, with insufficient time to plan for impactful and co-ordinated interventions.

Operationally, according to interviewed staff of the Secretariat and HCs, requests for development support, thus financial resources, also came from Ministerial Meetings and from the capitals of member countries. These opened doors to various and diverse forms of requests from member countries, while the Secretariat found it challenging to decline requests from member countries, especially when these matched either with the Commonwealth’s mandates or contributed to outcomes stated in the Strategic Plan. Some Secretariat staff were of the view that, being a 56 member country organisation, the Secretariat may be obliged to respond to all such requests for support. Most interviewees believed that a review of the position on responding to mandates

and requests was critical to more strategic planning. Clarifying the prioritisation of projects based on available funding will help safeguard the competitive advantages of the Commonwealth and ensure it remains a credible development partner to its member countries. The Secretariat has developed an internal procedure to assess requests for support from member countries. These are managed by a Development Assistance Committee, which assesses each request against criteria covering alignment with the Strategic Plan as well as feasibility.

Nonetheless, as the result of the above, according to the interviewed Secretariat staff, every Strategic Plan, including the current one, has continued to expand in scope even in the face of uncertain funding. According to the majority (more than 70 per cent) of interviewed SMC, Secretariat and HC staff, implementing such a large portfolio, within the limited annual budgets, has led to a situation whereby many activities are implemented at a reduced scope and do not offer prospects for meaningful impacts.

3.2.3 Assessment of the MEL system

MEL systems at the Secretariat include the organisational Theory of Change (TOC), the Strategic Results Framework (SRF), the Detailed Results Framework (DRF), the Programme Strategy Document (PSD – consisting of a programme TOC, a MEL Plan, a Programme Work Plan) and the Project Design Document (PDD – with a MEL Plan, a Work Plan, a Budget). Figure 3.5 presents components of the MEL approach.

The MTR assessment indicates that, although the Secretariat’s MEL approach has evolved over the years, it has not sufficiently adapted to the changing operating context, in particular the realities of

diminished budgets. The current operating realities of the Secretariat require a concise, accurate and simplified approach to MEL. Most the Secretariat staff and HC interviewed felt strongly that the MEL system was overly complex, had too many layers, required inputs from programme staff not proportionate to the size of programmes and projects, and was not coherent. This echoes findings from evaluations carried out during the previous Strategic Plan period (van Hemelrijck and Holland, 2022). On the other hand, key aspects of MEL, such as defining and capturing clear outcomes, are currently inadequate.

We try to quantify what we do including whether participants have increased capacity and if they plan to use this. But we do not have the capacity and tools to follow up. The way our M&E [monitoring and evaluation] and reporting is set up is that we are not able to quantify our outcomes and impact. It covers everything under the sun. By the time we measure and report on impact, the essence is lost.

Member, SMC

Utilisation of a TOC in planning, monitoring and reporting

An organisational TOC was established for the first time in the current Strategic Plan in response to recommendations from the Independent Evaluation of the Strategic Plan for 2017/18–2020/21. In some parts of the Strategic Plan, it is defined as an organisational level TOC ‘that will anchor programme-level theories of change in the delivery plan that forms the basis for the measurement of change.’ In other parts of the Strategic Plan, it is referred to as ‘the Strategic Plan’s TOC that translates the spirit of the Commonwealth Charter into a set of programmes and actions’ (e.g., page 39 of the Strategic Plan).

While it is a notable effort, the TOC in its current form has some gaps that limit its value to support planning when assessed against best practices and based on feedback provided by programme staff. First, there is confusion, according to interviewed stakeholders and according to the definitions in the Strategic Plan, between it being an organisational TOC or a Strategic Plan TOC. As a result, programme teams have not actively used the TOC as a guiding document on how change (including impact) influenced by their programme has come to be. In its current form, the TOC does not fulfil the requirements of either

an organisational-level TOC or a Strategic Plan TOC. As an organisational TOC, the Consultant Team observed that it had a number of gaps, by not articulating the Secretariat’s vision, mission and organisational values. If it is considered to be a Strategic Plan TOC, it does not describe the proposed inputs, including budget and staff resources, to achieve the end results of the Strategic Plan. This is an important design feature for a credible Strategic Plan TOC, particularly given the fluctuating budgets of the Secretariat. Including well-defined inputs that are required to deliver the Strategic Plan in the TOC will provide the Secretariat with a strong justification to prioritise its scope and programme delivery according to changes in funding commitments by member countries.

Second, the Consultant Team was not persuaded that the TOC provided a coherent framework for how the organisation expects to bring about change through the Strategic Plan. More specifically, the Consultant Team observed that the TOC did not describe the causal relationship from inputs, to outputs, to intermediate and strategic outcomes and impact, which would be an important requirement of a Strategic Plan TOC. As a result, a systematic approach to monitor changes influenced by the interventions mentioned in the SRF or DRF is not yet in place.

A number of issues emerged from a review of planning documents including the Strategic Plan, PSDs, the DRF and Annual Delivery Plans and based on feedback from interviews. A first observation is the close resemblance between the TOC and the SRF. The Secretariat has developed two variations of the results framework, the SRF and the DRF. The TOC contains ‘impact pathways’ but does not include ‘intermediate outcomes’ whereas the SRF includes ‘intermediate outcomes’ and excludes ‘impact pathways.’ The TOC also includes impact statements, assumptions and risks whereas the SRF does not. Organisational enablers are present in both diagrams although the contents differ. The value of having both the TOC and the SRF is not very clear to the staff interviewed and some of the SMC members.

In the TOC, the current impact statement is *member countries fulfil their national contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals in alignment with the Commonwealth Charter* (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2022h). This is overly ambitious given the budget and other resources available to the

Box 3. Overview of impact pathways

The TOC of the Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 groups impact pathways into two sets: Member State Focus and Global Focus. Under the Member State Focus, the points are (i) enhance member countries' institutional capacities and (ii) strengthen member countries' enabling and institutional environment with evidence-based policy and legislation development, which leads to individual and unique priority needs of member countries in responding to their SDG targets met in the areas of governance, elections, rule of law, human rights, anti-corruption, trade, debt management, climate change, finance, youth, gender and education.

Under Global Focus, the emphasis is to (i) facilitate connections and networks for knowledge exchange and joint action among member countries and with Commonwealth organisations; (ii) build consensus on and advocate for Commonwealth values and the concerns of small and other vulnerable states, which leads to a consistent and united Commonwealth voice on priority issues, including small states, COVID-19, climate change and trade. Key words are in bold for emphasis.

The organisational TOC describes the four impact pathways as:

- Consensus-building, thought leadership and advocacy by convening member countries to build consensus around Commonwealth values, providing thought leadership and others;
- Connectivity and networks by facilitating connections for knowledge and innovations, exchange, and co-creative and joint actions to enhance the Commonwealth system and action networks;
- Policy and legislative development through technical assistance and expert advice to foster an enabling environment for peace, good governance and sustainable development;
- Institutional and capacity development through tools, technologies and training for leaders, technical officials, system actors and institutions, to improve performance and effectiveness.

Secretariat. There are currently no indicators to measure this impact. It is understandable that impact takes time to materialise. Furthermore, the impact of some of the political work carried out by the Secretariat is rightly seen as difficult to measure by programme staff. However, concerted efforts can be made to define and measure impact, be this over the period of a Strategic Plan or two Strategic Plans or more. This is crucial given that the Secretariat is an institutional implementer of programmes that are often regular in nature, and not a temporary entity that comes together to implement a finite project. This was highlighted as a major gap by the majority (more than 70 per cent) of SMC and HC staff interviewed and in the Evaluation of the previous Strategic Plan (van Hemelrijck and Holland, 2022). Impact measurements are needed to make it possible to understand how results from project and programme implementation can contribute to impact, to aid in decisions about prioritising interventions for the rest of the Strategic Plan period. The Secretariat has undertaken a number of data projects that can inform the information requirement for assessing

impact. A rapid data snapshot assessment activity to measure and report on member countries' implementation of the SDGs is underway by the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Science and Technology. Internal dashboards are also under development, covering a range of topics, including the SDGs, malaria, trade and country social and economic statistics.

3.2.4 Impact pathways

The impact pathways (see Box 3) are described as *delivery mechanisms to achieve impact*. The Strategic Plan further states that the impact pathways apply horizontally across strategic outcomes, programmes and projects, providing a valuable opportunity for collaboration, learning and sharing expertise on similar pathways across different policy areas. Impact pathways can also be mapped out *vertically across outcomes, outputs and activities, providing a roadmap for intervention that is more easily measurable and comparable* according to paragraph 32 of the Strategic Plan. Conceptually, the impact pathways aim to bring

together and capture the various activities taking place across the different directorates and diverse thematic areas.

The impact pathways were broad and generic enough to capture the different types of support provided by the Secretariat to its member countries. The document review and interviews indicated that there was no evidence to suggest new emerging activities in the current strategic period that did not fall into the defined pathways. However, this observation may change if assessments of the Secretariat's support are widened.

Based on the interview data, the impact pathways have not been fully operationalised and the majority of those interviewed were unable to provide specific examples of their use. Generally, interviewed staff were unclear about the role or purpose of the impact pathways, and some, including SMC members, had to be reminded what they were. Some interviewees saw the impact pathways as a communication device; others saw them as a reporting mechanism; and some thought they were a way to artificially fit activities into boxes. According to interviews with HC staff, often the impact pathways were not referred to during engagements with member countries.

Only a handful of interviewees saw the value of the impact pathways in providing a framework to deliver, monitor and report on impacts in a structured way; even they were aware that the impact pathways were not serving their intended purpose.

I have absolutely no ideas what they [impact pathways] are – maybe it has not been explained to us well. Maybe it guided our work back in 2021.

Secretariat staff

At a planning level, PSDs and PDDs incorporate the impact pathways in their rationale and in the development of their respective results frameworks. However, the Annual Delivery Plans (for 2021/22 and 2022/23) and the Annual Results Reports do not integrate information on impact pathways in line with the above stated expectations of the Strategic Plan. The Annual Results Report 2022/23 (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023b) colour codes the impact pathways throughout. However, there is limited aggregation or analysis on the use of the impact pathways in explaining how various activities will come together to deliver impact. Moreover, the report contents are

not collated according to the impact pathways. According to feedback from Secretariat staff, information is available to enable aggregation and analysis of projects and programmes by impact pathway. Consequently, more needs to be done to utilise available information in reporting and for cross-sectoral learning, which would enhance the operationalisation of the impact pathways. The added value of the impact pathways should be assessed as part of the consolidation, simplification and focusing of MEL processes; this is reflected in the recommendations provided in Chapter Four.

I am an advocate for the impact pathways – helps people see the work they do. I have sense others have not using it to analyse their work.

Secretariat staff

Results frameworks - the SRF and the DRF – and MEL plans within PSD and PDD

At the organisational level, the Secretariat has developed two variations of the results framework – namely, the SRF and the DRF – as tools to help monitor achievements of outcomes via annual targets. The SRF provides the strategic, intermediate, crosscutting and enabling outcome statements whereas the DRF elaborates the monitoring framework further, by identifying means of verification, performance indicators, baseline figures and targets. Secretariat and SMC interviewees saw the latter as a practical and useful tool.

The Secretariat has used an assortment of terms to describe its outcomes across the Strategic Plan and Annual Results Reports – including strategic, intermediate, enabling, catalytic, internal, organisational and crosscutting outcomes. The multitude of terms for outcomes has added additional layers of complexity for programme staff with regard to understanding and measuring progress that are taking place, and further fragments reporting without adding any significant value, according to the majority (over 70 per cent) of interviewed Secretariat staff. Similarly, the majority (over 70 per cent) of HC interviewees shared that the terminology around outcomes created confusion and deviated from the main focus of capturing positive change.

The most significant gap relates to performance indicators for outcomes and impact and how they are used to capture changes. These indicators are seen in different documents at the Secretariat.

A review of the intermediate outcomes in the DRF highlights that all performance indicators are quantitative, and 41 out of 43 focus on *number of member countries or group members or stakeholders or % share of member countries or bodies that implement the Secretariat recommendations, reforms, strategies or approaches*. A major gap in this approach is that the performance indicators do not sufficiently capture or describe the positive changes or the process of change taking place in the member country. This gap also applies to two out of four performance indicators for crosscutting outcomes and for two of the catalytic outcomes. The majority (more than 70 per cent) of SMC, Secretariat and HC interviewees agreed with these findings and felt that the intermediate outcome indicators in their current form did not capture the change or outcomes that are still taking place.

Since we focus on five countries for our programme, every year it [the indicator] would be five countries, which would not really convey the theory of change. We found the indicators were like trying to put a square peg into a round hole. It is time consuming and does not add value.

Secretariat head of section

Regarding the use of indicators in Annual Result Reports, the Consultant Team observed a lack of consistency. The Annual Results Reports contain different categories of indicators: the past six years have seen strategic outcome, intermediate outcome, short-term outcome and output indicators, as well as different measures of assessment, such as 'target met or exceeded,' 'good progress,' 'progress delayed' and 'no data available,' along with 'highly satisfactory,' 'satisfactory,' 'fairly satisfactory,' 'not satisfactory' and 'not measurable.' The lack of consistency is a challenge for result comparison and for evaluating and communicating progresses on outcomes over a number of years.

For the strategic outcomes, the Secretariat has identified indicators from SDG targets and contributions to specific Commonwealth Charter paragraphs. Achievement of the SDGs as a strategic outcomes of the Secretariat's Strategic Plan is overly ambitious, given the size and nature of the Secretariat's support to the member countries and the challenges in proving the contribution of the Secretariat's initiatives against other national and international entities. Such

measurement references are misplaced within the DRF and should be positioned as an impact by the member countries themselves. Data regarding progress by the Secretariat towards achieving its strategic outcomes was not available in the Annual Reports or the Secretariat MEL system. Besides specific SDG indicators, there are no indicators to measure contributions to specific Commonwealth Charter paragraphs.

Reporting

Reporting against indicators and targets set in results frameworks happens twice per year. This includes self-reported progress from programme teams, which is validated and consolidated into Six-Monthly and Annual Results Reports to the Board of Governors.

Quarterly Performance Reviews (QPRs) are conducted by SPPDD in collaboration with teams dealing with finance, risk management, gender and youth. According to the Secretariat's MEL approach (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018c), QPRs are meant *to review delivery and financial performance, allow for cross-team sharing on challenges and collaborative identification of solutions* resulting in an action plan to address issues and ensure delivery is on track. A review of the QPRs for Q1 2022/23 and Q2 2022/23 confirms that these focused on delivery issues in internal governance, financial management, HR, risk management and MEL. For example, they identified issues such as clarification on handling on-going work in countries in breach of the Abuja Guidelines; challenges in responding to mandates arising from Ministerial Meetings against diminishing budgets and the need for prioritisation; and securing funding for the Year of the Youth activities.

Interviewed programme staff confirmed that QPRs and six-monthly progress reporting was a routine exercise embedded in project management practices. However, more needed to be done to ensure the system supported collaborative solutions, clarity on prioritisation and adaptive planning. Some SMC and Secretariat staff were concerned about the ability of QPRs to facilitate learning on the generation of outcomes and associated factors from the delivery of the Strategic Plan. These interviewees were also concerned that the process omitted relevant action to operationalise recommendations arising from the QPRs.

We do it because we have to, but it does not lead to any action.

Secretariat head of section

Much of the reporting and monitoring done by the technical teams is a box-ticking exercise and usually done by a junior member of staff. The current monitoring and reporting approach is not adding value. It requires more learning, reflection on outcomes and impact and also engagement with the SMC.

Secretariat head of section

A significant level of effort by SPPDD and programme staff is channelled into developing Annual Results Reports. However, there remains a crucial gap, as highlighted by most HC interviewees, who view the Annual Results Reports as on the one hand providing too much detail on activities and outputs delivered, which could be placed in an annex. On the other hand, according to these interviewees, there is limited information on areas where programmes have contributed to the achievement of strategic outcomes and emerging impact. Lessons learnt, particularly challenges for programme implementation, are not sufficiently covered. HC interviewees appreciated that the Secretariat was respectful to its member countries and did not want to create tensions by pointing out shortcomings and challenges in delivering the Strategic Plan. However, there were concerns that the Secretariat was painting a utopian scenario with no challenges nor failures.

It is important for us understand the challenges that the Secretariat faces in terms of delivery.

HC interviewee

Although the most recent report shares some of the shortcomings discussed above, its format has improved compared with in previous years. There have been considerable improvements to the structure, content and layout of the Annual Results Report for 2022/23. This recent report provides a better balance of synthesis by programme, including aggregation of key achievements and expenditure by intermediate outcomes and by fund. There is also a more detailed overview of financial performance by strategic outcomes.

Case studies and impact stories describe available evidence of change and, to a lesser extent, emerging impacts. A review of the impact stories identifies that, of the 15 in the 2022/23 Annual Results Report, seven are informational descriptions of activities rather than stories of

change. This is, however, a noted improvement on 2021/22, when there were 16 impact story boxes, of which 11 were descriptions of events or project activities. HC interviewees expressed positive feedback on these improvements although other stakeholders encouraged the removal of technical jargon and simplification of terminology.

We are having a conversation based on the annual report. We are trying to translate the annual report into something more accessible. Sometimes the writing is complex. The conversation about how we can triangulate results better and how we can demonstrate the work better is an on-going conversation. We are discussing having a pull out that everyone can understand.

Secretariat staff

These gaps in reporting were viewed by many of the interviewed member country stakeholders as a major limitation. Based on their feedback, the absence of reporting at the impact level has been a clear cause of concern over the years. The limited information reported on outcomes, impact and challenges was seen as a major factor affecting trust in and transparency of the Secretariat, according to staff from six HCs. Consequently, according to these staff, they found it difficult to justify higher levels of CFTC contributions with their capitals, which was highlighted as a major reason for the reduction in CFTC contributions by these countries over the past eight years.

The reports do not demonstrate actual achievements, outcomes and also lessons learnt. The Secretariat does not admit if they go wrong and why. This leads to transparency issues and contribute to diminishing trust. We are not able to justify to our capital on our CFTC contributions.

HC interviewee

It is not the Secretariat's money it is member countries' money, and it needs to be used properly for their benefits. I agree with the stance that impact is not easy to measure in terms of for example political work. To me the impact is the result of several indicators. We need to define these indicators, capture and report on them to demonstrate impacts and justify funding.

HC interviewee

Member countries want more impact for the money they spend. Traditional sources for funding have dried up, we need to look for more creative ways of fundings such as partnerships with the

private sector. We need to showcase and tell our story better. And demonstrate to our client the impacts of every dollar spent.

Secretariat staff

Summary of key findings

- The definition of mandates has significant implications as it is a key starting point for the planning of outcomes in the Strategic Plan, PSDs and the allocation of resources in Annual Delivery Plans. Thus, mandates are an important component of planning, and require clear definitions and operationalisation.
- The Secretariat's three-tiered planning processes are well structured to translate the mandates from member countries into action.
- The time gap between the budgeting for income based on CFTC pledges and CFTC actual contributions means that the Secretariat has to plan and commit to delivery before actual funds are received. This poses a risk to planning. The alignment between budgeting and planning could be strengthened to give the Secretariat greater certainty on available funding of programmes and allow for longer-term commitments that are more supportive of sustainable outcomes and impact.
- The Secretariat's MEL approach is well intentioned, establishing the link between project actions and strategic outcomes. However, the measurement of outcomes and collection and use of lessons in delivery could be improved. The overall MEL system should also be streamlined further to be more appropriate to the programme size and available resources.

3.3 Implementation of recommendations of previous Strategic Plan evaluation

Following completion of the Evaluation of the previous Strategic Plan (van Hemelrijck and Holland, 2022), the Secretariat's SMC agreed on management actions in response to its recommendations. This section summarises progress in the implementation of these as at the mid-term of the current strategic period.

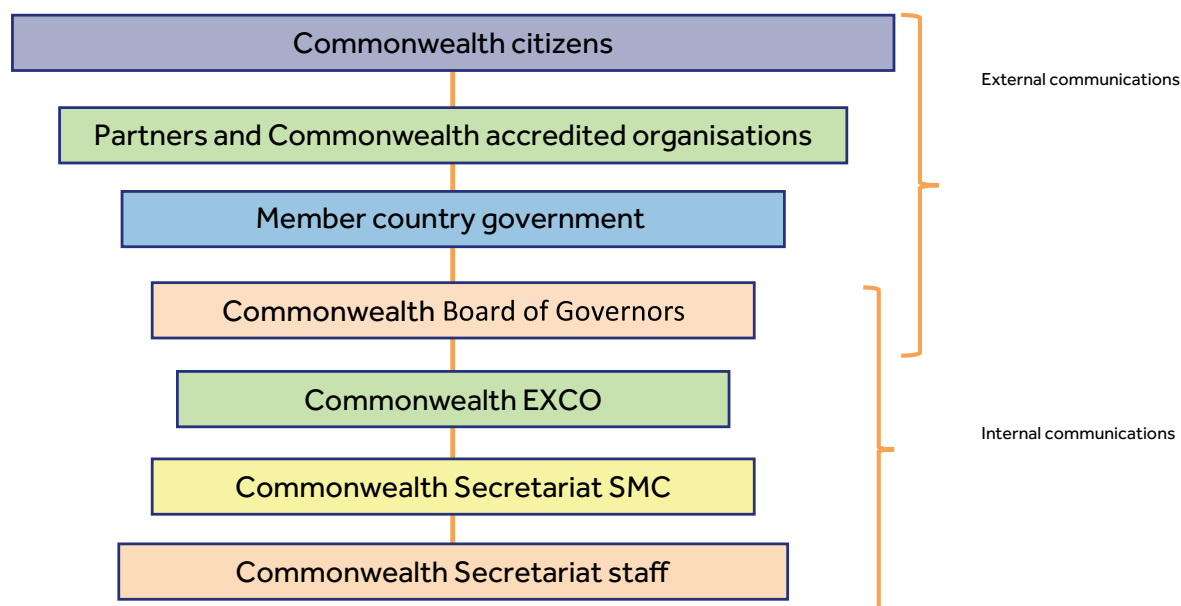
Recommendation 1: Organise an externally facilitated and inclusive process, preferably an offline event, at the start of the new strategy period and before the next mid-term review to:

- Build shared vision and intent among leadership on unleashing the potential power of the Commonwealth's unique and historical identity;
- Create clarity and alignment around the Secretariat's unique value proposition (UVP) and core mandates of the Secretariat, including core assets;
- Adopt an organisation-wide UVP-centred and thematically prioritised approach to identify priority big investment topics;
- Develop coherent and joined-up programmes that demonstrate contribution to impact.

Recommendation 5: Focus on strategically aligning the Secretariat's programming around big-ticket items

These recommendations were partially accepted in the management response and have been partially addressed. The Strategic Plan 2021/22—2024/25 is seen to offer a balance of strategic priorities from member countries and the UVP of the Secretariat through its four strategic pillars. The Strategic Plan was developed in a consultative process involving member countries, partner organisations and Secretariat staff. However, processes for thematic prioritisation, identifying priority investments and developing a coherent approach to programmes that demonstrate impact have not materialised. The Secretariat recognises that the main challenge to thematic prioritisation lies in facilitating and reaching agreement among member countries. According to interviews with HCs, a plethora of thematic areas will always emerge in demands for support, given the membership base of 56 countries and their variety in terms of stage of development and political priorities. However, with funds declining, it is in the Secretariat's best interests to prioritise its support and investment using a structured approach. As an intergovernmental organisation that supports member countries, it cannot unilaterally determine priorities. As such, the Board of Governors has initiated the process of change through the establishment of three Informal Working Groups, on Administration and Programmes, on Reforms and on Funding and Finance.

Figure 3.6. Key communication stakeholders of the Secretariat



Source: Author team (2023)

Recommendation 2: Building on recommendation 1, develop a shared understanding of the Secretariat's core assets and how these can be leveraged, given a changing world, to enable the Secretariat to deliver and demonstrate its contribution to impact in big-ticket areas

This recommendation was accepted in the management response as a valuable exercise for staff, member countries and partners. There is agreement from the Board of Governors that there should be a greater focus on prioritisation. The Board has initiated this process through its three Informal Working Groups. At the time of conducting this review, the meetings of these were on-going and the Secretariat was awaiting the outcomes to inform the operationalisation of a prioritisation approach.

Recommendation 3: Draw on 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 in the prioritised big-ticket areas

This recommendation was partially accepted in the management response. Agreement on an organisational TOC and impact pathways was achieved through a series of workshops. The

organisational TOC and impact pathways are meant to articulate how the Secretariat delivers change at member country and global level. The impact pathways are seen as a conceptualisation of the Secretariat's ways of working or delivery models. However, based on the findings of this review, the TOC and impact pathways are not sufficiently operationalised to contribute to the planning and delivery of the Strategic Plan and to inform the learning agenda within the Secretariat. This was further elaborated above.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen the Innovation and Partnerships section to develop strategic partnerships that enable the Secretariat to expand its reach and influence in priority topics, beyond what it can do on its own

This recommendation was accepted in the management response. Although the Innovation and Partnerships section has been understaffed, the new leadership of SPPDD has sought to fill vacancies, with a new head commencing work in November 2023. Despite limited staff resources, significant efforts have been made to develop strategic partnerships, resulting in 14 new partnerships established by the section in collaboration with programme teams.

Recommendations 6 and 7 focus on establishing a human resourcing, talent acquisition and retainment strategy and ensuring realistic budgeting in a few priority areas

These recommendations were partially accepted in the management response. Efforts are in place to establish processes and policies to address implementation.

3.4 Other factors influencing achievement of Strategic Plan outcomes

The following factors were identified as organisational enablers in the Strategic Plan. The critical nature of their role in the effective implementation of the Strategic Plan emerged as strong themes in interviews with Secretariat staff and Board members.

3.4.1 Communications

Communication in its external and internal dimensions (see Figure 3.6) emerged as an important enabler for the realisation of outcomes in the current Strategic Plan. This was a recurring theme during interviews with HC representatives and SMC members.

Externally, the Secretariat engages with 56 member countries across different time zones. External communication involves engagement at various points, such as technical line ministries, high commissioners, ministries of foreign affairs and ministries of finance in partner countries and the wider Commonwealth public of 2.5 billion citizens. Internal communication involves all levels of Secretariat staff. The Board of Governors is a critical overlap for internal and external communications.

The link between communications and the delivery of the Strategic Plan is very clear. The Communications section is expected to promote and publicise the work of the Secretariat and the values of the Charter to help build and better understand the Commonwealth and, by doing so, support the achievement of the outcomes in the Strategic Plan 2021/22—2024/25 (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023a). The majority of SMC members (more than 70 per cent) and many (more than 50 per cent) Secretariat staff agreed communication was an important mechanism

to support the implementation of programmes under the Strategic Plan and a means to secure partnerships and funding.

Communication structures and processes

Figure 3.6 presents an overview of the main stakeholders of the Secretariat and the different requirements for internal and external communication to facilitate effective delivery of the Strategic Plan. Some stakeholders, such as EXCO and the Board of Governors, are recognised as having both internal roles, in terms of governance of the Secretariat, and external roles, representing the interests of their respective member countries.

The communications efforts of the Secretariat are led by a director of communications and addressed through teams covering digital communications, media relations, internal communications, knowledge management and publications. Significant effort goes into providing activity-based communication support, which includes a media plan and strategy. The activities also target governments, the media and the public and aim to promote the core values, impact and uniqueness of the Commonwealth to enable organisational success. These improvements are steps in the right direction. However, review of these activities reveals that planned communication activities are more activity support-focused rather than strategically aligned behind organisational messages. The Secretariat could benefit from a communication strategy that is also thematic and member country-focused.

Internal communications

The 2017 Communication Review (Aequitas 2020) highlighted internal communication as an area for improvement and made recommendations that are being addressed by the Communications team. The Secretariat has several tools for internal communications, such as a corporate e-Bulletin, an intranet platform and dedicated internal communications staff. Other initiatives include *Commonwealth in the News*, an internal newsletter to alert staff to media stories on the Commonwealth. Staff are also encouraged to write and share blogs internally to share their work with colleagues.

Nonetheless, the MTR found there was further room to improve on internal communication. Staff interviewed shared that internal communications were insufficient and reduced the coherence of the organisation in reacting to specific situations. For example, staff commented that senior management sometimes took decisions on project priorities based on the political dynamics between the Secretariat and member countries, which are not known by programme staff. The rationale as to why certain decisions are taken by the SMC is often not shared or made clear to relevant heads of sections and programme **advisors**. This has led to a perception among many interviewed staff of a lack of transparency and can lead to a lack of coherence on the delivery context, as well as missed opportunities for synergies and efficiency gains. Since 2022, the SMC has developed a decisions grid, which is shared with relevant heads and other staff following SMC meetings. The communication of this can be improved to ensure downward filtering of information to guide staff.

We are poor at communicating... Things like how the Commonwealth meetings went or the senior officials' meeting. This kind of information is important to the whole organisation. All staff should be brought together on the journey, so that they know. There could be more efforts to make the whole Commonwealth as an organisation know each other better.

Secretariat staff

There is opportunity to improve the different flows of communication within the Secretariat, which will also encourage synergies between the SMC, heads of sections and programme staff.

I think there is still a lot to do in how and what we communicate.

Senior Management Committee member

External communications

The Secretariat uses different communication tools and channels, such as email, social media platforms, articles, the Huddle platform, the organisation's website, briefings and outreach forums. In addition to scheduled and extraordinary meetings and briefings between the Board of Governors/EXCO and the SMC, the Huddle platform provides secure access to confidential documentation and communications. All interviewed Board members felt it was necessary to implement more targeted communication, however.

Besides the established official communication channels to engage with formal stakeholders, wider external communication currently takes place in a less structured or strategic manner, through scattered initiatives. Limited communication activities are focused on engaging member countries and Board members sometimes report a lack of awareness of in-country initiatives.

There is always the communication block between the Board and what happens in the country. I find that high commissioners are not aware of the work we do in their country. So we need to bridge the

Box 4. Overview of HR processes

The Strategic Plan TOC underscores prioritised and appropriate HR as an organisation enabler. Major factors driving HR processes include a Rotation Policy that dictates a maximum term of appointment for contracts for diplomatic and professional grades of three years and a maximum number of contracts of two or three. Staff in diplomatic and professional grades can serve a maximum of six or nine years, respectively. The Rotation Policy, established by the Board of Governors, aims to promote diversity and representation of staff across Commonwealth nationalities and regions, and a gender balance, and to bring in new ideas.

HR processes are managed by the HR and Facilities Management section under a director of human resources who reports to the Deputy Secretary-General of the Secretariat. Among the functions that the HR section undertakes are knowledge management, learning and organisational development; health and well-being; recruitment and talent retention; enforcing guidelines and policies on the Staff Handbook and promoting best practices; and compliance with applicable laws and regulations.

gap between the commissioners and the capitals and countries. We need to find a way to make communication better

Secretariat staff

If we don't communicate, stakeholders won't understand what's happening to the funds they are giving. I see efforts towards this, and I hope this continues.

Secretariat staff

External stakeholders, such as HCs and member countries, critically reflect on the value proposition of the Secretariat and its Strategic Plan. Keeping these stakeholders, who are both funders and beneficiaries, informed via effective communication is paramount to realising the intentions of the Strategic Plan. The Secretariat's regional heads play an active role in co-ordination between the Secretariat and member countries and as such are a key conduit to internal and external communication. Discussion with regional heads as part of the MTR revealed that, though many are new to their roles in this strategic period, they are keen to support improvements to co-ordination and seek to actively engage programme staff so they can respond to queries or facilitate exchange of information with member country representatives.

The communication components in the Annual Delivery Plans for 2021/22 and 2022/23 target *communicating the impact of the organisation through internal and external communication*. The Annual Delivery Plan 2021/2022 included activities in response to the Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Communication in 2020 (Aequitas, 2020). These included procuring a new website, updating the internal platforms and intranet, improving staffing resources, implementing new strategies for more effective working and increasing resources for content creation. The activities also targeted governments, the media and the public and aimed to promote the core values, impact and uniqueness of the Commonwealth to enable organisational success. These improvements are steps in the right direction. It may be more challenging to communicate 'impact' in the current realities of the Secretariat's MEL system, as discussed before. Therefore, it is necessary to better align the communication approach in the Annual Delivery Plans with overall implementation and available MEL information.

Currently, the Secretariat's online communication channels include Commonwealth websites and social media accounts. A total of 1,076 report titles have been published on the Commonwealth website as of 8 January 2024. The average number of downloads of the publications is between 6,000 and 7,000 per year. Media monitoring activities are outsourced but it is unclear what information is gathered and how this is used to monitor articles published by external stakeholders related to implementation of activities or specific projects that are part of the Strategic Plan. Plans in the pipeline include working closely with the directorates to increase the number of articles published. The Secretariat is also rationalising and streamlining existing websites with a view to consolidation.

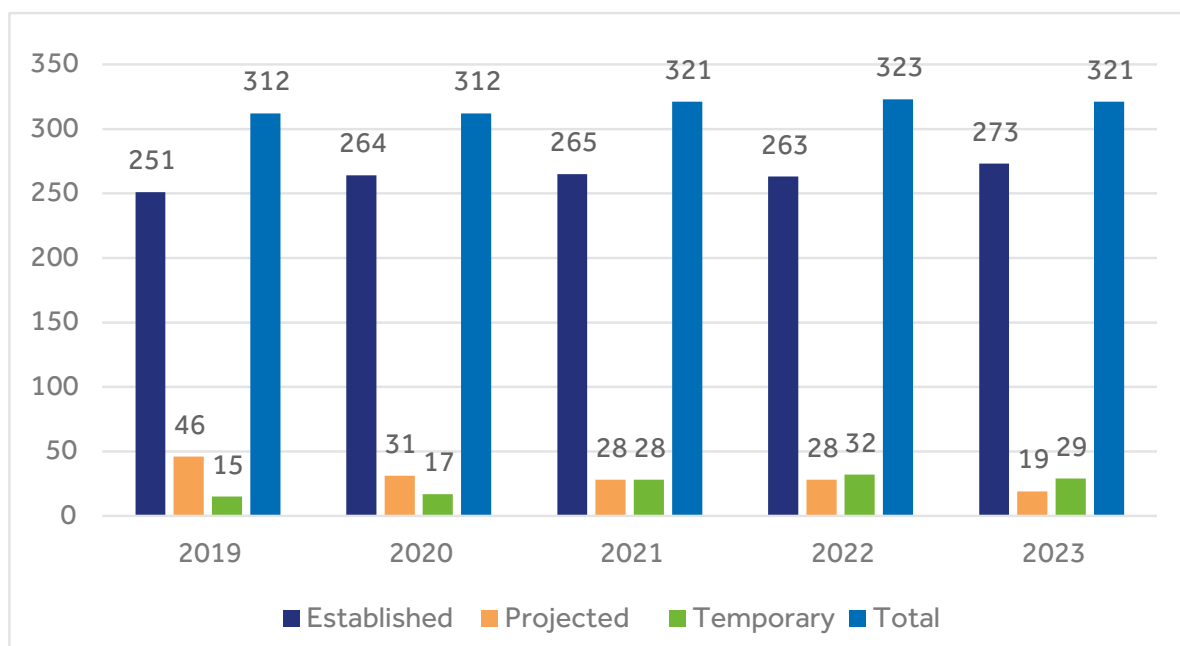
3.4.2 Human resources

The Secretariat staff are its major asset. Staff are credible technical experts in their respective fields and are very dedicated. They are passionate about their work and the mission of supporting member countries, despite limited remuneration increments and career development opportunities within the Secretariat. Staff costs are 50 per cent of total direct programme costs.

The MTR identified that key measures had been implemented or initiated to improve HR processes. The average time taken to hire for vacant posts reduced from 156 days in Q1 2022/23 to 101 days in Q1 2023/24 for posts that were filled (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023e). Recruitment timetables have also been established and agreed with hiring managers. IT system support tools have been enhanced to automate HR processes. The HR division has introduced supportive tools and services for staff health and well-being. Staff also have access to a wider portfolio of learning opportunities through online programmes addressing managerial and leadership development.

Despite diminishing budgets, particularly in the CFTC, full-time, or established, staff posts have experienced a slight increase, from 251 in 2019 to 273 in 2023, largely because of the increase in the number of temporary posts from 15 in 2019 to 29 in 2023. On the other hand, project-based posts decreased in number from 46 in 2019 to 19 in 2023. Figure 3.7 provides a trend of staff roles by type from 2019 to 2023. However, the total number of

Figure 3.7. Trend in Secretariat staff posts by type

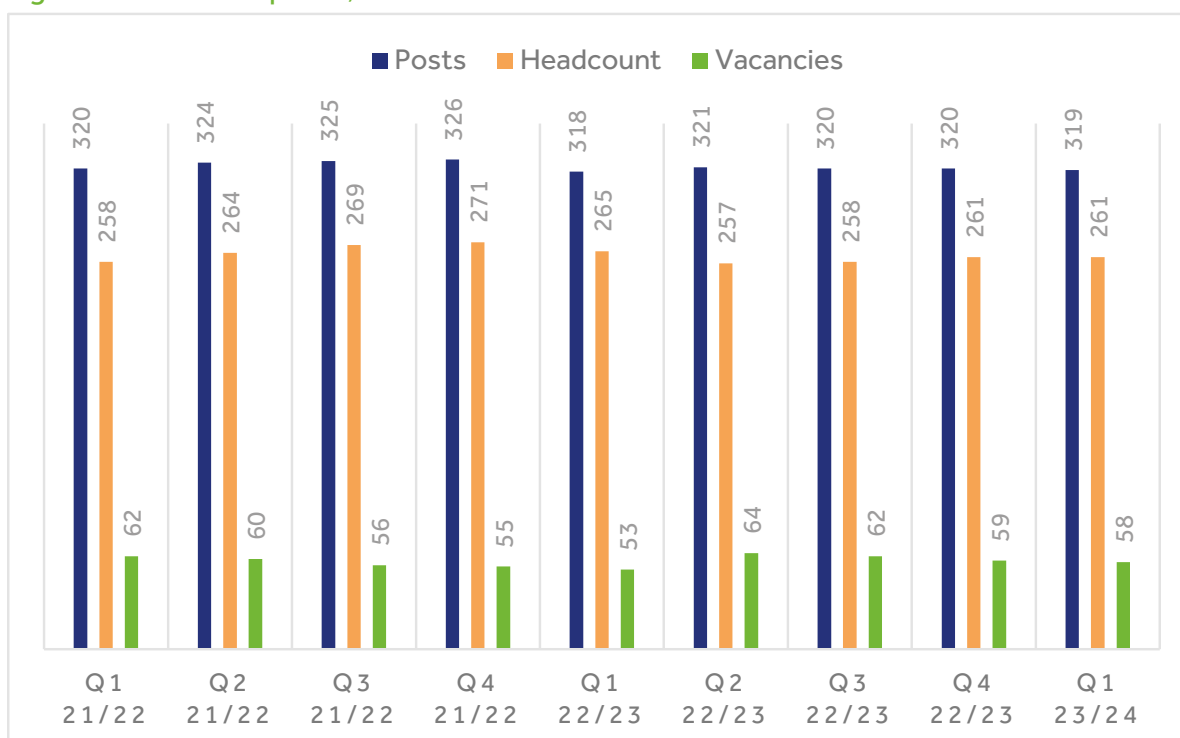


Source: Commonwealth Secretariat (2023)

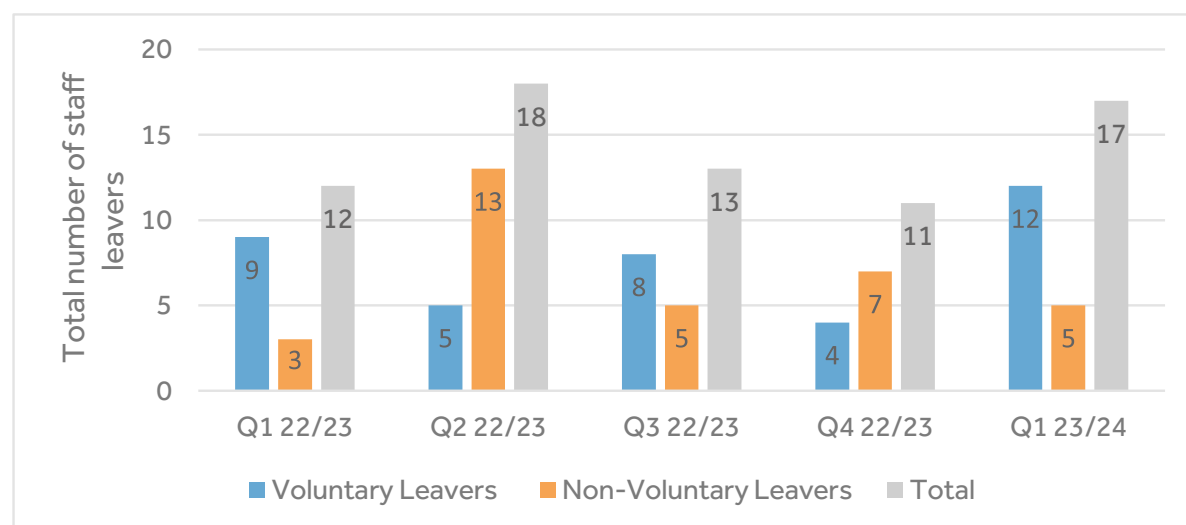
approved posts has remained similar since 2021, in line with guidance from the Board of Governors that there should not be any major increases in the total number of posts (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023e).

However, in comparison with in 2019 and 2020, although in 2021 the number of posts increased, the number of vacancies has remained relatively high, with an average of 59 at any given time in 2021/22—2022/23 (Figure 3.8). Despite reduced time taken to fill vacancies, 58 (approximately

Figure 3.8. Trend in posts, headcount and vacancies



Source: Commonwealth Secretariat (2022g, 2023e).

Figure 3.9. Staff leavers, from Q1 2022/23 until Q1 2023/24

Source: Commonwealth Secretariat (2023e).

18 per cent) of all posts remain vacant in Q1 2023/24. According to interviewees, these unfilled vacancies have increased the workload for current staff and inhibit the implementation of projects. Delaying recruitment is one means by which the Secretariat copes with the funding uncertainties.

Staff development was another factor that the Consultant Team observed as influencing delivery of the Strategic Plan. According to the majority (more than 70 per cent) of interviewed Secretariat staff, limited prospects for career progression and lack of pay rises have inhibited the Secretariat's ability to attract the best talent for vacant positions and thus affect the ability of the Secretariat to develop and leverage its talent pool to implement the Strategic Plan. For example, interviewed Secretariat staff believed they had limited career development prospects as there was no formal process by which a staff member could progress through the ranks of the organisation.

Figure 3.9 provides an overview of staff leavers from Q1 2022/23 until the end of Q1 2023/24, with a total of 71 staff leaving the Secretariat during this period (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023e), representing close to 21 per cent of the workforce for 2022/23. Of these 71 leavers, 38 were voluntary leavers, representing 10 per cent of the workforce, resigning within their contract period, and the balance were involuntary leavers under the Secretariat's Rotation Policy, reaching the retirement age or affected by other factors leading to a termination of services (ibid.). Staff who have

rotated out have specific expertise in delivering to the Commonwealth and their institutional memory cannot be easily recovered through the recruitment of replacements.

3.4.3 Partnership and innovations

The enabling outcome statement for partnerships is 'delivery through co-creative partnerships increased.' The main indicator for the partnership outcome is 'a share of the Secretariat projects demonstrating leveraging of partnerships to deliver sustainable change in member countries.' The Annual Results Report for 2022/23 shows the Secretariat as having met the 25 per cent target for this indicator as of June 2023. This figure triangulates with the interviews conducted by the Consultant Team. Out of 127 interviewed staff, 30 (23.6 per cent) indicated they had made use of partnerships to implement their projects. According to the Annual Results Report 2021/22, an estimated 40 per cent of Secretariat programme teams reported that partnerships had supported them in the delivery of their outcomes.

The Partnerships section of SPPDD embarked on a number of initiatives in 2021/22 and 2022/23 to meet these expectations. The work has focused on partnerships with five main groups of stakeholders as outlined in the Partnerships Strategy: member countries, Commonwealth organisations, international partners (including development partners and regional organisations), the private sector and philanthropic organisations.

Box 5. Overview of Secretariat partnerships

Partnerships was an enabling outcome in the Strategic Plan for 2017/18–2020/21. In response to this, a Partnerships Strategy was developed in July 2018. Partnerships are an organisational enabler in both the TOC and the SRF of the current Strategic Plan. Delivery of projects and programmes through co-creative partnerships is expected to increase. Partnerships were conceived as the 'accelerator' of the current Strategic Plan, driving the mobilisation of resources in the face of reduced member contributions to voluntary funds, particularly the CFTC.

The Evaluation of the Strategic Plan for 2017/18–2020/21 emphasised the importance of partnerships to enhance the outcomes and impacts of the Secretariat work (van Hemelrijck and Holland, 2022). This was expected to be done by facilitating partnerships linking member countries with development partners who could provide technical assistance and resources. Partnerships, along with digital tools, technology, innovation and connectivity, are considered key means to adapt and enhance resilience in response to emerging global developments and trends (ibid.).

The MTR identified 14 new partnerships facilitated, including 12 memoranda of understandings (MOUs) and two letters of understanding, during 2021/22 and 2022/23. These included partnerships with the International Maritime Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the International Trade Centre, the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation, the International Hydropower Association, the Africa Enterprise Challenge Fund, the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, the Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance and the African Union Development Agency.

Partnerships have delivered EBRs to extend Secretariat programme reach (namely, in natural resource management, trade capacity-building and the Commonwealth Blue Charter) as well as delivering improved access to programmes and funding for the direct benefit of member countries (in youth and digital skills development). As an example of the use of partnerships to support programme delivery, around US\$5 million was raised in collaboration with the International Trade Centre and the Islamic Trade Finance Facility to enhance the capacity of women-owned medium, small and micro enterprises in Cameroon and Pakistan in 2021/22.

The Partnerships and Innovations section is currently in the process of evaluating 64 out of 89 Commonwealth accredited organisations that are due for re-accreditation, a process that happens every six years. The Secretariat evaluates the work by these accredited organisations and their alignment with the Commonwealth Charter. It also

assesses governance, structures, finances, audited financial reports, membership in terms of staff and activities implemented. Data is analysed and submitted to the Accreditation Committee, which recommends (or not) re-accreditation to the Board of Governors.

Despite achievements within the current Strategic Plan, a few barriers remain. The due diligence process on Commonwealth accredited organisations consumes a substantial proportion of the limited HR in the Innovations and Partnerships section, which could be repurposed to focus on facilitating partnerships for programme implementation. At the same time, many of these Commonwealth accredited organisations do not directly support the implementation of the Strategic Plan. According to Secretariat staff, these organisations have very limited financial resources and typically implement a single activity with a limited scope in terms of reach across the Commonwealth. Exceptions to this include larger Commonwealth accredited organisations such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities, which has over 500 member universities across 40 member countries, and the Commonwealth Youth Human Rights and Democracy Network, active in the Caribbean, South Asia and East Africa.

Moreover, according to interviews with many (over 50 per cent) interviewed programme staff, the Secretariat has a very long list of existing MOUs in place, facilitated by different sections across directorates and by the Innovations and Partnerships section. Many (over 50 per cent) of Secretariat staff interviewed were currently not aware or did not have information on the updated

list of existing MOUs, their coverage or who the designated focal point in the partner organisation was. If such information were available and easily accessible, Annual Delivery Plan activities could be accelerated by building on an existing partnership instead of establishing new partnerships, which require time and resources. Several programme staff shared that, for partnerships to truly become an 'accelerator' in implementing the Strategic Plan, criteria for partnerships need to become more dynamic and bilateral, with the Secretariat also accommodating partner requirements.

One of the issues with our partnerships approach is that we often want MOUs to be on our terms. Given funding realities, we need to be more accommodating to other partner organisations and their needs, to find synergies.

Secretariat staff

The established partnerships have helped bridge some gaps in the declining CFTC funding and contributed to meeting priorities in the Strategic Plan. However, increased collaboration and delivery through partnerships requires facilitation between the Innovation and Partnerships section and respective programme and technical sections. A major challenge faced by the Innovation and Partnerships section, in playing its role as an 'accelerator' for the Strategic Plan, has been lack of sufficient human resources. The section has been staffed by one officer over the past 12 months, with numerous vacancies lying open for the past 18 months. A new head of section commenced work in November 2023. Many interviewed programme staff acknowledged the good work done by the Innovation and Partnerships section but indicated they were unable to leverage the section's support because of the limited existing human resources available there.

The work on innovation focuses on developing and implementing data-driven approaches for evidence-based policy-making. Examples include capacity-building to train government agencies in the use of the Commonwealth SDG Tracker and the Commonwealth COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker. According to the Annual Results Report 2021/22, 10 member countries from the regions of Africa and the Caribbean reported benefits from innovations facilitated by the Secretariat. Twelve member countries and key stakeholders have adopted Secretariat-facilitated digital/technological solutions. Regular activities include the Secretary-

General's Innovation for Sustainable Development Awards, where achievements of innovators are recognised, facilitating access to funding and other partnership and business opportunities. The Secretariat is also planning to launch the Commonwealth Innovation Envoys programme. The Innovation Envoys are former winners of the Secretary-General's Innovation for Sustainable Development Awards, and they will act as innovation champions across the Commonwealth.

In 2023, the inaugural edition of Kenya Innovation Week took place through a roundtable between Ministers of Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) and top innovators from Commonwealth countries. This Innovation Week is expected to be continued in other countries in coming years. A regular set of STI Ministerial Meetings is also planned. A new joint Climate and Health Innovation Accelerator Fund was also launched at COP28 in December in partnership with PATH global health organisation.

Summary of key findings

- Communications and HR development have emerged as key enablers as envisioned in the Strategic Plan. The Secretariat is making steady progress in strengthening these functions but more needs to be done to leverage these as strategic assets through talent development and clear messaging on the Secretariat's value proposition.
- In this Strategic Plan period, the Secretariat has demonstrated its ability to mobilise resources for member countries through partnerships. The continued strengthening of the Partnerships function and the streamlining of policies and procedures, including around resource mobilisation, will be critical to realising the value of investments in partnerships over the second half of the Strategic Plan period.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter summarises the MTR conclusions and proposes recommendations to address challenges and build on progress in successfully delivering the Strategic Plan over the second half of its implementation.

The Commonwealth Secretariat is an organisation shaped by history and strives on the spirit of consensus. It is acknowledged as an organisation that provides support without an 'agenda.' The Secretariat has a long-standing image among its member countries and the development community. It is trusted by its members. The Secretariat's political work, its Good Offices and the exercise of its convening power have resulted in high-level political engagements and promoted democratic processes and resolutions at head of state and ministerial levels, access that is often outside the reach of development organisations.

Overall, the MTR found evidence of strong progress in delivering the 13 intermediate outcomes prioritised under the Strategic Plan. This progress reflects information against the indicators identified within the DRF, which serve as performance targets for the Strategic Plan and are the basis of the Secretariat's Annual Reporting. Within the limited financial resources available and significant vacancies, the Secretariat is able to deliver an extremely diverse and relatively large volume of projects. During the current reporting period, 44 projects were delivered covering the breadth of the Strategic Plan. This is evidence that the Secretariat is always striving to deliver to the member countries.

Notwithstanding this significant progress, the MTR also identified challenges in planning, budgeting, monitoring and the assessment of impact and benefits to members. Drawing on discussions of these areas with internal and external stakeholders, a number of recommended actions are proposed below for the consideration of the Secretariat's SMC.

4.1 Planning

The MTR found that the Secretariat had structured and detailed mechanisms to facilitate its planning processes. The planning for the Strategic Plan is three-tiered and top-down but responsive to demand from member countries and emerging changes in the development context. There were some gaps and challenges in the planning process; if these are addressed, this may enhance the quality of programming, thus improving support to member countries and leading to better achievement of planned outcomes and impacts. At the operational level, disagreements exist on which mandates to be used – whether they should come from Ministerial Meetings only or also in the form of requests from member countries.

Recommendation 1: As mandates represent important guidance for planning and help the Secretariat's technical teams stay on track and prioritise impactful interventions, clearer definitions and operationalisation of mandates are needed for the remainder of the Strategic Plan's implementation and future Strategic Plans.

4.2 Prioritisation

The MTR found that the Secretariat lacked a consistent approach to prioritisation.

Recommendation 2:

- (i) To adapt to the changing operational environment while remaining relevant and strategic and safeguarding quality, the Secretariat should develop a framework and procedural mechanism to guide programmes in the prioritisation of projects for inclusion in the Annual Delivery Plans based on realistic budget assumptions. This framework can build on existing mechanisms, such as the Development Assistance Committee process for evaluating member country requests.

- (ii) The Secretariat should provide transparent communications and reporting on the outcomes of the prioritisation process internally and to the Board through the Delivery Plans.

4.3 Budgeting

The Secretariat has a high utilisation rate regarding its approved direct budget, of between 90 and 95 per cent. The MTR found that annualised approval of budgets based on the share of the previous year's budget significantly constrains the benefits of this utilisation rate in planning and therefore limits the operational effectiveness of the Strategic Plan.

Recommendation 3: The Board of Governors should consider the implementation of a multi-year planning and budgeting cycle to achieve efficiency gains through greater predictability in the availability of committed funds, realistic implementation timelines and sustained results-focused implementation. A multi-year planning cycle would also allow for better integration with the Strategic Plan focus on outcomes and greater efficiencies in delivery planning.

Recommendation 4: To improve the sustainable financing of the Strategic Plan, the Secretariat should establish a dedicated support structure and strategy for resource mobilisation with capacity and expertise in fundraising, business development and targeting strategic partnerships.

4.4 MEL and reporting

The Secretariat's MEL systems have evolved over the years, and significant efforts have gone into developing processes and tools. However, these have not sufficiently supported the organisation to capture changes influenced by the Strategic Plan. The TOC and its impact pathways in its current form has limited practical value in supporting planning for change and guiding the assessment of impacts. Meanwhile, impact and strategic outcomes are not adequately defined and captured. There are multiple tools and terminologies for monitoring results, with inconsistent languages for outcomes and a lack of sufficiently qualified indicators to capture change or outcomes that are still in the making. As a result, in its current form, the MEL system does not meet its core objectives to support informed reporting and decision-making.

Recommendation 5:

- (i) Develop a Strategic Plan TOC that describes the causal relationship from inputs including clearly defined resources, to outputs, to intermediate and strategic outcomes and impact in line with best practices to address the gaps identified in Chapter 3 of the MTR. This TOC can be piloted during the remainder of the Strategic Plan period and used during the end-of-term review of the Strategic Plan.
- (ii) Strengthen the existing organisational TOC by including an articulation of the Secretariat's vision, mission and organisational values.

Recommendation 6: The Secretariat needs to review the practical value of the impact pathways in describing and monitoring the Secretariat's Strategic Plan outcomes. The Secretariat should in the interim better utilise and communicate the pathways through staff training, monitoring and reporting processes, and cross-sectoral learning.

Recommendation 7: The Secretariat has dedicated a great deal of effort to elaborate and detailed reporting, though there remain crucial reporting gaps covering the achievement of strategic outcomes, impact, lessons learnt and challenges. It is critical that the Secretariat streamline MEL and the reporting system to address data gaps and better describe the benefits that member countries are gaining. The Secretariat should:

- (i) Review, consolidate and simplify MEL tools to focus on its core objectives of supporting informed decision-making and policies, particularly around the generation of outcomes and impact.
- (ii) Update the DRF to define and capture major outputs, outcomes and impact based on the remaining programme of work. Incorporate qualitative indicators and adapt best practices in defining SMART indicators.
- (iii) Pilot the updated DRF if feasible for the remaining period of the Strategic Plan period. This would enable establishment of a robust approach for the next Strategic Plan that provides greater accountability for the use of member country funds to create impact and demonstrate value.
- (iv) Identify mechanisms to assess strategic outcome and impact, including possibly by focusing country evaluations on these themes.

Strengthen capacities to evaluate outcomes and impact through the development of relevant tools and skills. This can be part of the longitudinal data collection to capture strategic outcomes and impact over a 10-year period and support decision-making and planning.

Recommendation 8: Learning processes are viewed as silo-based and there are gaps in learning around the generation of outcomes and impact. To improve learning processes and leverage the benefits for the implementation of the Strategic Plan, the Secretariat should:

- (i) Review QPRs and identify mechanisms to focus on exchange of best practices across directorates, cross-sectoral synergies and addressing institutional inefficiencies.
- (ii) Consider undertaking progress reviews on a six-monthly basis instead of quarterly.
- (iii) Develop mechanisms and processes to capture learning from the delivery of activities.
- (iv) Ensure MEL plans (in PSDs) include learning outputs and outcomes, which can be included in the proposed six-monthly progress reviews.
- (v) Share six-monthly learning information across technical leads.
- (vi) Conduct outcome and impact learning events on an annual basis.

4.5 Communications

Communication has emerged in the MTR as an important enabler for the effective delivery of the Strategic Plan. Communication activities have targeted governments, the media, partners and the public and aimed to promote the core values, impact and uniqueness of the Commonwealth to enable organisational success. Communication between the different levels across the Secretariat, particularly between the SMC and programme teams, can be improved to increase opportunities for synergies and co-operation for effective implementation during the second period of the current Strategic Plan.

Recommendation 9: The Secretariat can address communication gaps as follows:

- (i) Implement more open communication activities as part of internal communication to foster better working relationships between

the various levels of the Secretariat and facilitate more effective information-sharing approaches. Simple but impactful activities can include Town Hall Meetings that facilitate dissemination of information on a directorate level, Brown Bag Sessions with heads of directorates or Tuesday Tea with the Deputy Secretary-General and or monthly meets with the Secretary-General to encourage creative collaborations and learning.

- (ii) Decisions on budget allocations and the outcomes of SMC discussions should take place in a transparent manner to help staff understand the rationale for decisions.
- (iii) Moreover, to support the delivery of the Strategic Plan, it is necessary to align the communication approach in the Annual Delivery Plans to the overall implementation and MEL realities of the Secretariat.
- (iv) Regarding external communications, to mobilise national awareness and support for the delivery of the Strategic Plan, the Secretariat would benefit from a thematic and country-focused communication strategy.
- (v) Reinforce the role of the regional heads in enabling effective communications between programme teams and member countries. This will call for enhancing processes for information flow between programme teams and regional desk officers on country-level activities.
- (vi) Conduct country, subregional and regional engagement events (informal), including hosting by member countries to strengthen country, sub-regional and regional engagements and the coherence and dissemination of materials such as regional or sub-regional e-newsletters.
- (vii) Consolidate communication processes between the Secretariat and various member country contact points including HCs, ministries of foreign affairs, ministries of finance/planning and line ministries where possible.

4.6 Human resources

The Secretariat has made meaningful efforts to improve HR processes.

Recommendation 10: To allow for feedback that can inform staff engagement and improve staff morale, the Secretariat can undertake a staff engagement exercise through, for example, an anonymous survey, a Town Hall Session or another mechanism, to identify factors that can improve staff retention and address perceived barriers to job satisfaction.

4.7 Partnership and innovations

The Secretariat has drawn on existing and new partnerships with development partners, philanthropic entities, the private sector, Commonwealth organisations and institutions to support the delivery of the Strategic Plan in several areas. Some partnerships have led to the leveraging of technical assistance and financial resources for the delivery of the Strategic Plan. Because of human resource limitations, the Secretariat has been unable to leverage on partnerships sufficiently to support all programme sections and to realise the priority for partnerships to be the main accelerator for the Strategic Plan.

Recommendation 11: The Secretariat can strengthen the role of partnerships as an accelerator for the Strategic Plan as follows:

- (i) For the rest of the current Strategic Plan period, staffing for the Partnership and Innovation section needs to be filled, so that capacity to leverage support for the implementation of the Strategic Plan can be mobilised.
- (ii) Moreover, selection of accredited organisations that directly support the implementation of the Strategic Plan might be prioritised so that accredited organisations can be mobilised better towards implementation of the Strategic Plan.
- (iii) Expand the current records on Secretariat MOUs to include information on core thematic priorities, regional and national experience, regional and national focal points, and funding opportunities.

4.8 Conclusion

Like for an extended family with 56 members, the challenges to the Commonwealth Secretariat are multitude; addressing these in an open and constructive manner is key to continuous progress and success. The Secretariat needs to:

- **Recognise and react** to issues and challenges, including by taking difficult decisions such as on prioritising and sunsetting thematic programmes;
- **Change to sustain**, through taking the necessary steps and adapting its approach to changing realities to survive and become more resilient;
- **Be seen to be valued** by improving reporting, communication and co-ordination with member countries, development partners and Commonwealth citizens;
- **Generate demand to grow** to create and demonstrate value and impact.

The way forward is well encapsulated by the following quote from the opening speech at COP28 by the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, the Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland KC:

Decisive action, rooted in the sharpest honesty is the only way forward.

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Annex A. Terms of Reference

Mid-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2021/22-24/25

Introduction

The Commonwealth Secretariat (thereafter referred to as 'the Secretariat') is an intergovernmental organisation with 56 member countries in 2022. The Secretariat work is guided by its Charter as "*Affirming our core Commonwealth principles of consensus and common action, mutual respect, inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, legitimacy, and responsiveness*".

The Strategic Plan 2021/22 – 2024/25 reflects the shared priorities of member governments. The Plan outlines the Secretariat's theory of change and strategic direction under the following strategic outcomes:

- (i) Greater adherence to Commonwealth values and principles and advance good governance, through strengthened rule of law, democracy, peacebuilding, human rights, public institutions, and electoral processes enabled by value-based leadership.
- (ii) Sustainable and inclusive economic and social development pertaining to trade, financial and debt management, oceans and natural resources management and, health and education systems.
- (iii) Climate-resilient and low-carbon development to respond to climate and ocean emergencies, through intra-Commonwealth co-operation on sustainable ocean action and energy transition and increased mitigation and adaptation actions; and
- (iv) Small and other vulnerable states' needs and concerns will be addressed in global governance mechanisms and their resilience to shocks increased.
- (v) Cross cutting Outcomes address gender mainstreaming and youth empowerment
- (vi) Enabling outcomes address organisational performance

The four-year Strategic Plan is operationalised annually through Delivery Plans and Annual Budgets approved by the Board of Governors. The Delivery Plans presents a detailed plan for each of the 13 Programmes designed to deliver to the above strategic outcomes. It also describes any reforms in portfolio and operations management practices likely to impact on delivery. The Delivery Plan includes progress reporting on the Detailed Results Framework (DRF) which sets out intermediate outcomes and indicators with baselines and annual targets, aligned with the programmes and strategic outcomes. It therefore established the performance framework for the strategic plan against which the Secretariat reports annually to the Board of Governors.

The Commonwealth Evaluation Plan 2021/22-2024/25 provides for the conduct of a Mid Term Review of the Strategic Plan, which mid-point will be reached in June 2023. In 2022, the Secretariat completed an Independent Evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2017/18 – 2020/21 which provided recommendations for actions at the strategic mid-term. In its Management Response, the Senior Management Committee agreed to take action to address, inter alia, the need for improved organisational approach and mechanism for prioritisation. The Management agreed actions also address the need to review organisational approaches in planning, monitoring and evaluation. The mid-term point is also utilised by the Secretariat to assess the appropriateness and utility of the DRF for assessing performance and allows for changes to the definition of outcomes indicators and targets to allow for clearer, more evidence informed results monitoring and reporting.

This term of reference (TOR) provides guidance to a short-term consultancy to conduct the MTR of the current strategic plan.

Purpose and Scope of Assignment

The Strategy, Portfolio, Partnership and Digital Division (SPPDD) is commissioning a Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 to be delivered by external consultants with support from the SPPDD's evaluation team. The purpose of the MTR is to assess progress in the realisation of the intermediate, crosscutting and enabling outcomes as set out in the Detailed Results Framework, and provide clear strategic and operational recommendations to improve the Secretariat's planning, prioritisation and overall performance over the second half of the strategic period.

The MTR will be reflective and forward looking and will:

- Assess progress towards the achievement of the **intermediate outcomes** to date by review of the 13 programmes and a sample of Secretariat projects
- Synthesize the **organisation's performance** in planning, delivery, and monitoring, evaluation and learning drawing on information available through the quarterly performance reviews.
- Review progress in implementation of the Strategic Plan Evaluation recommendations (for the strategic period 2017/18 – 2020/21), particularly the **key milestones** that were to be achieved by the mid-term level.
- Review the **relevance and effectiveness of the Secretariat's impact pathways** in articulating the achievements of expected strategic outcomes at the organisational and programme levels.
- Review the organisation's **approaches to planning and criteria for prioritisation and resource reallocations** to propose practical options for management consideration. This will include a review of how the organisation embeds Commonwealth Head of Government Meetings (CHOGM) mandates in its Delivery Plans and evidenced areas of comparative advantage for the Secretariat.

The MTR consultancy will deliver a report on the findings on the progress towards the achievement of goals for the strategic period 2021/22 – 2024/25, identifying success factors and lessons and proposing clear actionable recommendations that can be taken in the short term to course correct.

Methodology

The MTR will be utilisation focused, seeking to engage programme teams, decision makers, Board members, external stakeholders and partners in order to ensure that findings from the MTR inform necessary learning and adjustments to programme delivery for the second part of the strategic plan.

In order to meet its expected objectives, the Midterm Review consultancy will complete the following actions.

- A **desk review** of the Strategic Plan and CHOGM mandates, all programme and project records related to the tracking of the Detailed Results Framework, its evidence base (including available evaluative and audit reports) and the underlying programme and project MEL plans that inform it.
- Update the **strategic context through a global and regional environmental scan** to identify changes that bear on the relevance and external coherence.
- A **rapid assessment** of the organisation and programme theories of change to identify what has worked or not worked to understand the impact, thus recommending corrective measures to the organisations impact pathways and M&E approach and practices.
- **Interview/survey** key stakeholders
- High Commissioners, government representatives, programme partners, collaborating institutions, funders, Commonwealth organisations.
- Conduct focus group discussion with programme teams in the Commonwealth Secretariat to reflect on TOCs, success factors, challenges and lessons from the implementation of the strategic plan to date.
- Conduct focus group discussions with key stakeholders, including Senior Management and Governors on the progress in the implementation of the strategic plan evaluation recommendations, specifically on recommendations with key actions expected to be implemented and reported at the mid-term stage.

- Synthesis available country evaluation data to highlight the extent of the Secretariat's contribution to individual member countries' development needs in relevant areas.
- Write an MTR report (The draft structure of the report is to be discussed with the Commonwealth Secretariat's evaluation team during the inception phase).
- Conduct **validation workshops** on draft versions of the report with target stakeholder groups.
- Raw and secondary data sets used in the production of the report, especially if surveys and external data are part of the methodology.
- Support the development of communication outputs in collaboration with the Communications and Evaluation teams of the Secretariat
- Respond to editorial queries once the final report is submitted to facilitate copywriting and publication.

The draft (and final) Evaluation reports should not exceed 50 pages, excluding annexes. The copyright of the Evaluation Report shall belong to the Commonwealth Secretariat.

TIMEFRAME AND DELIVERABLES

The review commenced in July 2023 and initial drafts should be ready at the end of September 2023 for comments and feedback from the staff and Executive Committee of the Board of Governors. The final MTR report is expected to submit in November 2023. No field missions are envisaged for data collection. Should further travel be considered necessary later along the assignment, this will be agreed upon and the Secretariat will reimburse any costs to the Consultant(s) in line with the Secretariat's Travel Policy.

The MTR consultant(s) with the support from the Commonwealth Secretariat's evaluation team will provide the following deliverables:

- Inception report with the Evaluation framework, work plan, methodology and draft templates for proposed interview and assessment tools, and structure of the MTR report – *Due date 3 weeks after initial meetings with SPPDD.*
- First draft MTR for comments and feedback from the Evaluation Team - *Date to be agreed at Inception*
- Validation Seminar and presentation on Preliminary Evaluation findings and recommendations. *2-3 weeks after submission of the Draft Report*
- Second draft of the MTR report, incorporating all feedback/ comments received. *2 weeks after the validation Seminar*
- Final report submitted 2 weeks after receiving comments/feedback from peer review and the Executive Committee of the Board of Governors

MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

The evaluation will be managed by the Evaluation team of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the external consultant(s) will report operationally on progress to the Head of Evaluation. The Senior Director of SPPD will provide oversight to the evaluation. The Senior Management Committee will validate the final products.

EXTERNAL PEER REVIEW

As part of the quality assessment of the Secretariat's evaluations, this MTR report will be peer reviewed by at least two External Peer Reviewers. The Peer review will be conducted on the Final Report and the consultant may be expected to incorporate suggestions as appropriate.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Successful consultant(s) should have following credentials

- 7-10 years of evaluation experience, undertaking programme and organisational programmatic and theory of change assessments, evaluations and research for international organisations.
- Demonstrated evaluation, research and analysis skills including semi-structured interviewing, the ability to synthesize quantitative and qualitative data drawn from multi country reviews and broad strategic implementation plans.

- Demonstrated understanding of multilateral and intergovernmental organisations, political and diplomatic institutions and how they relate with member countries, especially the Commonwealth.
- Excellent communication skills, both spoken and written English, including experience in the production of clear and concise evaluation reports for planning and decision makers.
- Proven ability to engage and work with a wide range of different stakeholders from multiple countries and cultures.

Desired

- Familiarity with the mandate and programmes of Commonwealth organisations and the Secretariat
- Familiarity with sectors of work within the Strategic Plan (democratic governance, public institutions, youth and social development, small states, climate financing, oceans and natural resources, trade, financing for development).

How to apply

Interested consultant/s who meet the assignment criteria are invited to participate by submitting a proposal. The proposal (no more than 10 pages excluding annexes) should outline a high-level approach to the assignment, proposed workplan and budget for expected deliverables. The proposal should include 2-page C.V of the consultant (or consulting team), outlining your educational qualifications and professional experience in line with the person specification above, and a list of relevant work undertaken. 02 Example(s) of previous/ similar work in which the applicant played a lead evaluation/authorship role should be included in the appendix.

Annex B. Interview Tools

1. Key informant interviews tool for senior management

Respondent No. :

Date :

Time :

Theme :

The questions below will serve as a guide during the interview process. However, the interview will not be limited/restricted by these questions. The interview should be allowed to evolve organically to support meaningful dialogues and gathering empirical data to benefit the MTR.

1. The role of the Secretariat in monitoring, evaluation and learning to ensure the Strategic Plan is well executed and achieves its planned outcomes is indeed very crucial. In your view and based on your position - do you feel the reporting, monitoring, evaluation and learning activities provides you with sufficient information to support decision making?
2. What are your views on the approach to planning by the organisation, given country needs and the challenges of fluctuating budgets?
3. In your opinion, to what extent are CHOGM mandates embedded appropriately in Delivery Plans?
4. In the development landscape, there a range of players (for example FCDO, USAID, EU, the UN system and regional bodies). What do you see are the comparative advantages of the Commonwealth?
5. What are your views on the overall delivery process of the Secretariat?
6. What is your view on the communication activities of the secretariat?
7. Based on your experience how are the Secretariat's impact pathways helping to aggregate and communicate outcomes to the member countries (capacity building, policy strengthening, networks and consensus building)?

8. The Strategic Plan is now at its Mid Term point and the past years has been challenging due to various reasons. Given this, what in your view have been the main achievements of your directorate?

2. Key informant interviews tool for Secretariat staff

Respondent No. :

Date :

Time :

Theme :

I am Dr Channa Gunawardena and this is my colleague Dr Rona Chandran. We are independent external consultants engaged by the Commonwealth Secretariat to conduct the MTR of the Strategic Plan.

The specific MTR objectives are:

- Assess progress (from 2021 to 2023) in the achievements of the intermediate, crosscutting and enabling outcomes of the Detailed Results Framework, which is **reflective** in nature; and
- Provide clear strategic and operational recommendations to improve the Secretariat's planning, prioritisation and overall performance over the second half of the strategic period from 2024 to 2025, which is **forward looking** in nature.

Our interview will focus on some specific questions on which we would like your professional views. There are no wrong or right answers as the input provided is unique and this effort is part of a learning process. Your feedback will be synthesized with the inputs of other people we speak to and we will present this synthesis of findings in the report. We will not be attributing any feedback and comments in the report to any specific individual nor organisation. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the data collection and reporting process.

You may refrain from providing responses to questions that you might not be comfortable with.

This interview will take approximately 1 hour. Please let us know if you wish to seek any clarifications from us before we proceed. Please confirm if you would like us to proceed with the interview.

The questions below will serve as a guide during the interview process. However, the interview will not be limited/restricted by these questions. The interview should be allowed to evolve organically to support meaningful dialogues and gathering empirical data to benefit the MTR.

1. **How successful has the organisation being in planning, delivery, monitoring, evaluation and learning?**
 - a. How are the planning and programming outcomes relevant to the needs of the member countries, and aligned to global development agendas?
 - b. How do the delivery approaches (including innovations, partnerships, technology, digitalisation, HR, IT, Finance) enable the implementation of the Strategic Plan and Annual Delivery Plans?
 - c. How do the communication approaches of the Secretariat support successful delivery of the Strategic Plan?
 - d. How does the organisation engage with reporting, monitoring, evaluation and learning and do these contribute to effective decision making?
2. **How can the approaches to planning, prioritisation and resource reallocation be improved?**
 - a. How can the planning process (Strategic Plan, SPDs, Annual Delivery Plans, PDDs) be better aligned with budgeting and funding realities?
 - b. How are CHOGM mandates embedded appropriately in Delivery Plans?
 - c. How can the competitive advantages of the Commonwealth be better leveraged in planning, prioritisation and resource allocation?
3. **What progress has been made in the implementation of the Strategic Plan Evaluation recommendations (for 2017/18 – 2020/21) and what have been the challenges?**
 - a. What has been the progress in the implementation of the Evaluation recommendations?
 - b. What have been the barriers and challenges to the implementation of recommendations?
4. **To what extent are the Secretariat's impact pathways relevant and effective, including in articulating progress towards the strategic outcomes?**
 - a. How are the impact pathways helping to measure, aggregate and communicate with the member countries?
 - b. What is the relevance and effectiveness of the impact pathways in contributing to the achievement of the TOC, including emerging strategic outcomes?
5. **What have been the main achievements in terms of outcomes?**
 - a. What has been the progress in the achievement of the intermediate outcomes?
 - b. What are the achievements in terms of strategic outcomes and other emerging impact?
 - c. What have been the main barriers to the achievement of the outcomes and are there any lessons learnt?

3. Key informant interviews tool for High Commission staff

Respondent No. :

Date :

Time :

Theme :

I am Dr Channa Gunawardena and this is my colleague Dr Rona Chandran. We are independent external consultants engaged by the Commonwealth Secretariat to conduct the MTR of the Strategic Plan.

The specific MTR objectives are:

- Assess progress (from 2021 to 2023) in the achievements of the intermediate, crosscutting and enabling outcomes of the Detailed Results Framework, which is **reflective** in nature; and
- Provide clear strategic and operational recommendations to improve the Secretariat's planning, prioritisation and overall performance over the second half of the strategic period from 2024 to 2025, which is **forward looking** in nature.

Your feedback will be synthesized with the inputs of other people we speak to and we will present this synthesis of findings in the report. We will not be attributing any feedback and comments in the report to any specific individual nor organisation. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the data collection and reporting process.

This interview will take approximately 45 mins. Please let us know if you wish to seek any clarifications from us before we proceed. Please confirm if you would like us to proceed with the interview.

The questions below will serve as a guide during the interview process. However, the interview will not be limited/restricted by these questions. The interview should be allowed to evolve organically to support meaningful dialogues and gathering empirical data to benefit the MTR.

1. How does the Commonwealth Secretariat compare to working with other organisations (e.g. in terms of approaches to engagement, communication, country needs assessment, delivery, reporting)?
2. In your excellency's view, what are some notable achievements or outcomes as a result of the Secretariat support over the past 2 years, which are relevant to your country ?
3. What are your excellency's views on the competitive advantages of the Commonwealth Secretariat in the current era and how can this be better leveraged in securing funding from member countries or other sources?
4. We understand that the Secretariat contributions and budgets (CFTC) have been reducing over the past 10 years. What are your excellency's reflections on this trend and how do we overcome this ?
5. Given the need to prioritise support to create meaningful impact and how can less relevant mandates be sunsetted (closed off)?

Annex C. Evaluation Methodology Details

Evaluation principles

To achieve the expected purpose and scope of the assignment, the MTR design and conduct was driven by the following evaluation principles:

- Strong collaboration between the Consultant Team and the Strategy, Evaluation and Learning team of the SPPDD including regular meetings and discussions;
- Maintaining of externality and impartiality when engaging with stakeholders;
- Adherence to ethical considerations with primary data collection, including ensuring stakeholders were well informed on the purpose, scope and use of the evaluation, and how their views would be used; on the anonymity of views and feedback from stakeholders; and on the fact that answering of questions was voluntary and subject to their expressed consent;
- A structured approach to the collection and analysis of data to ensure rigour and comparability of findings and consistency and transparency in approach;
- Adoption an evidence-based approach using mixed methods including a combination of qualitative and available quantitative data;
- A focus on data that is reliable and feasible to collect;
- Maximisation of opportunities for utilisation through close engagement of and interaction with Secretariat senior management, SPPDD, corporate and programme teams, and Board members.
- Integration of gender considerations into the evaluation process.

The methodology was shaped by international best practices. The findings presented in Chapter 3 are based on the evidence from primary and secondary data sources used in the MTR and shaped by these credible and robust international best practices.

Conclusions and recommendations are based on the emerging findings and the independent judgement of the Consultant Team.

Organisation of work

Evaluation Team

The MTR was commissioned by SPPDD through the engagement of a Consultant Team. The consultants reported operationally to the head of strategy, learning and evaluation. SPPDD provided significant support to the Consultant Team in the conduct of the evaluation, particularly in facilitating access to secondary data and arranging interviews with stakeholders.

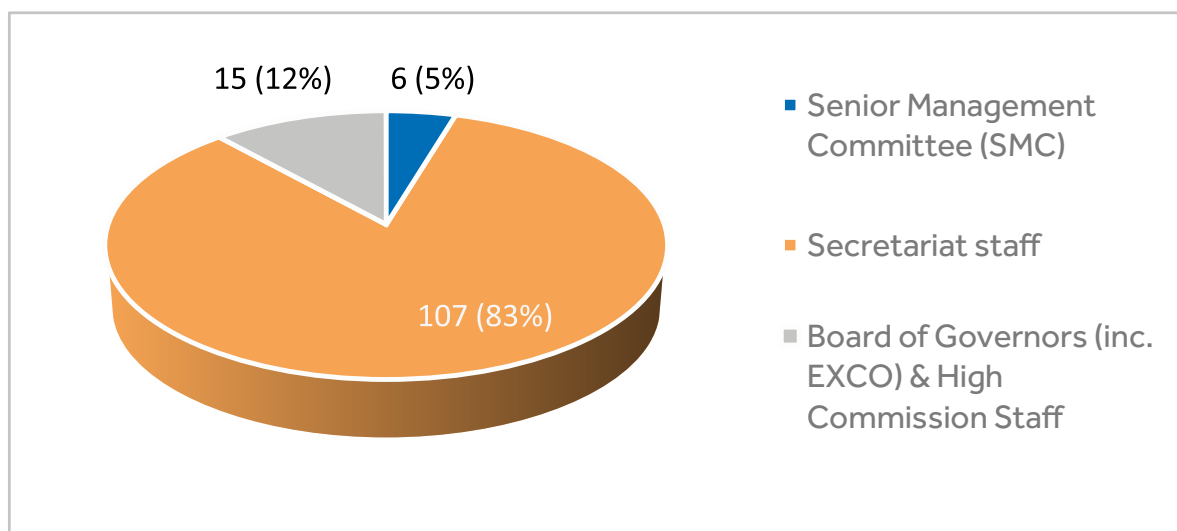
Regular calls, on an almost weekly basis, were held between SPPDD and the Consultant Team to manage MTR processes, address any challenges and discuss emerging considerations as part of the participatory and utilisation-focused approach.

Consultant Team

The Consultant Team consisted of a two independent external evaluation experts, Dr Channa Gunawardena (team leader) and Dr Rona Chandran (evaluation methodologist). There was a total of 65 working days between them. The consultants spent one week in London attending to face-to-face interviews and conducting FGDs with the Secretariat's staff, senior management and representatives of the Board. The available budget required optimisation in terms of depth and breadth of the data collection and careful assessment of existing data sources that could contribute towards answering the Evaluation Questions. This was done closely with SPPDD to ensure efforts were optimised.

The team leader, Dr Channa Gunawardena, had overall responsibility for the delivery of the outputs, acted as the main point of contact between the Consultant Team and the Secretariat and managed fieldwork and quality assurance. The evaluation methodologist, Dr Rona Chandran, had responsibility for guiding methodological design,

Figure C1. Breakdown of stakeholders interviewed



Source: Authors.

development of data collection tools, piloting of data collection tools, data collection, quality assurance of data collection and data analysis, particularly of qualitative data and reporting.

The team structured its work around the key outputs of the TOR, in line with the timeline presented below, which evolved to meet practical realities and challenges including availability of information and availability of stakeholders.

Evaluation Reference Group

The Evaluation Reference Group consisted of the Evaluation Team and focal points from each directorate within the Secretariat. It was chaired by the head of the Evaluation Team. Its role was to:

- Attend progress meetings;
- Suggest relevant documents to the Consultant Team;
- Propose relevant stakeholders for interviews and focus group discussions;
- Participate in interviews and focus group discussions with the Consultant Team;
- Update programme teams on the MTR;
- Provide authorised and consolidated feedback on MTR outputs from programme teams.

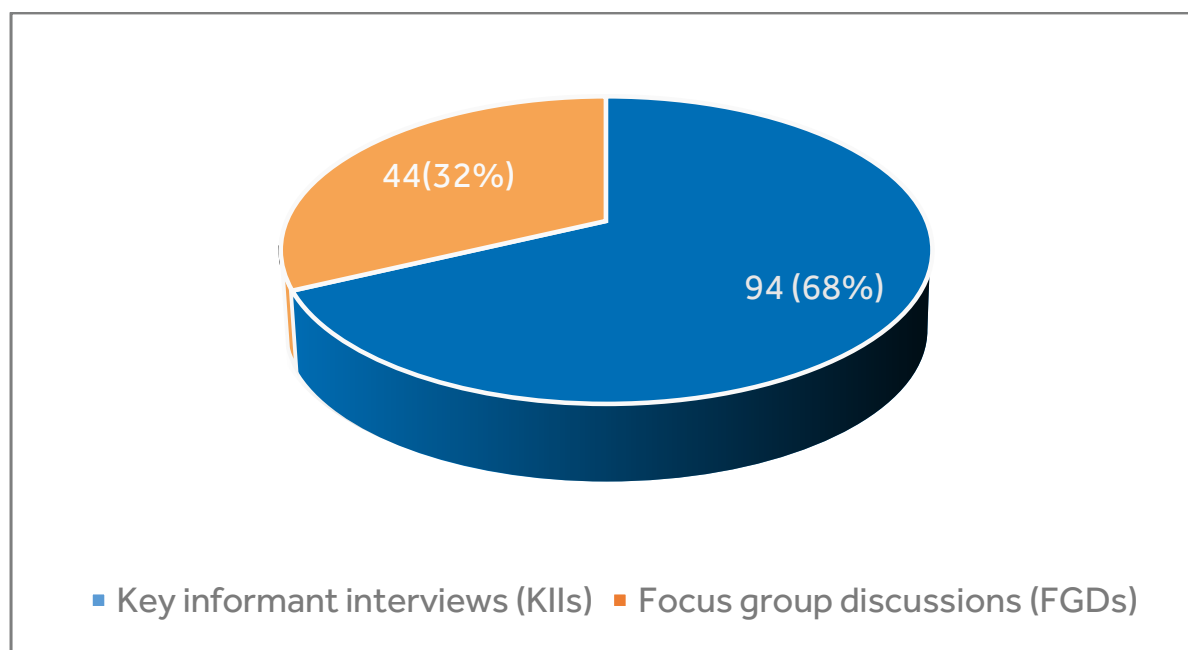
Oversight

The senior director of SPPDD provided oversight to the MTR. The SMC will validate the final product.

Data collection approach

KIIs and FGDs were carried out online and face to face as feasible. Semi-structured tools were used to guide these (see Annex 2). The tools were customised to suit the type of stakeholders being engaged. The semi structured tools were adopted to suit use of the Delphi Method on identified expert stakeholder groups. KIIs were approximately 60–90 minutes in duration and FGDs took around two hours. The validity of the tools and the data collected in relation to the Evaluation Questions was assessed on a regular basis by the Consultant Team.

Figure C2 provides a breakdown of the number of interviewees according to data collection approaches in terms of KIIs and FGDs. This number is higher than the number in Figure A.1 as some stakeholders took part in both KIIs and FGDs. FGDs were used in addition to KIIs, where appropriate and feasible, focusing on specific topics and/or emerging issues. Participants for FGDs were identified following the desk review phase and initial stages of the interview phase. Support from SPPDD in initiating contact, making introductions and facilitating KII/FGD appointments was pivotal for a successful data collection phase.

Figure C2. Breakdown of stakeholders by collection approaches

Source: Authors.

Figure C3 provides a breakdown of the gender of interviewees from the Secretariat and the HCs.

In addition to the KIIs and FGDs, the Consultant Team incorporated the Delphi Method into the data collection process. This offered great value to the MTR as the process engaged a range of stakeholders with senior decision-making roles, including SMC and Board members. The method is both structured and iterative, which offers a great opportunity to gather insights and opinions from such senior decision-makers and experts, especially on complex topics, to enable decision-making, forecast trends and develop strategies. During the data collection, specific emerging issues were identified and brought into discussion during interviews with the next decision-maker or expert. This was undertaken in a deliberate, strategic manner through prompts. The process guaranteed anonymity and the source of the issues and information that emerged was not disclosed.

Use of the Delphi Method to obtain data from senior management allowed six main areas to emerge as main areas for improvement within the current strategic period: budget, M&E, CHOGM mandates, administrative procedures, interdisciplinary work and communications. Findings on these topics and relevant recommendations are presented in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively. As a result of the findings using the Delphi Method,

an additional sub-question was added focusing on communications: How do communication approaches of the Secretariat support successful delivery of the Strategic Plan?

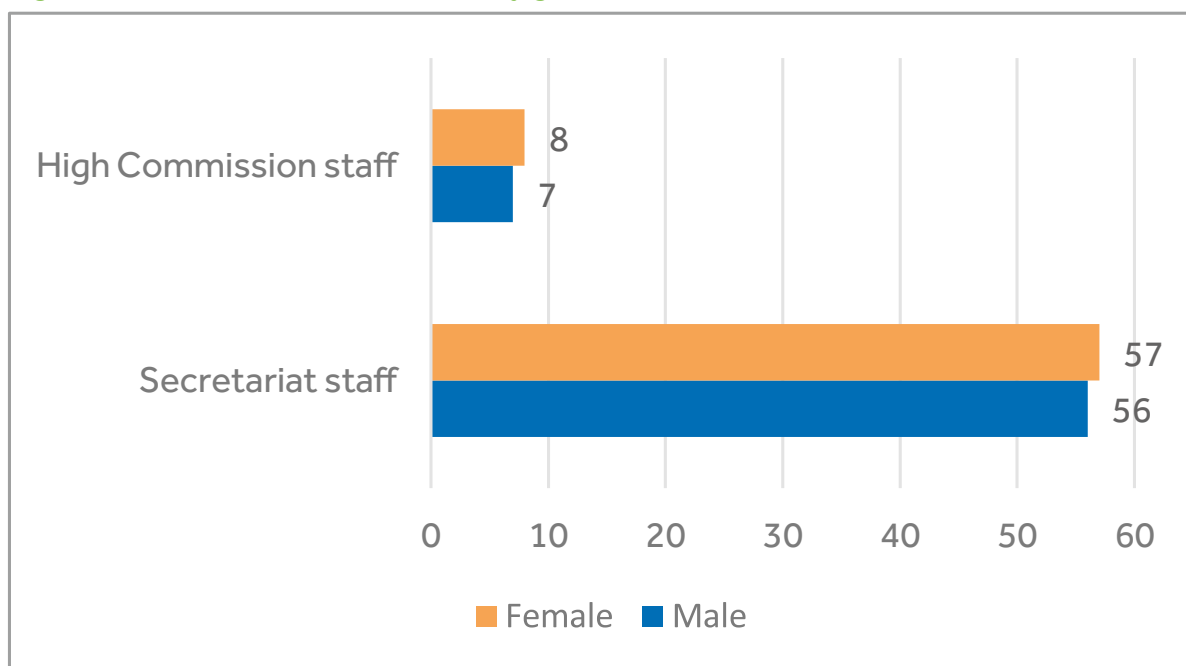
Quantitative primary data collection in the form of surveys was not used for the MTR. Learning gained during the inception phase allowed the Consultant Team to decide against collecting any primary quantitative data via survey tools. The Consultant Team was cognisant that in evaluations quantitative surveys often have low response rates, which results in lack of reliability of the data.

Data collection protocols

The Strategy, Evaluation and Learning Team, together with focal points from the Evaluation Reference Group, facilitated the arrangement of interviews between the Consultant Team and stakeholders including the SMC, programme staff and the Board of Governors including EXCO.

SPPDD used standard emails to share the objectives of the MTR, its importance to improve future programmes and the fact that feedback provided by interviewees would remain anonymous. KII/FGD tools were used to facilitate the actual conduct of the interviews. These introduced the

Figure C3. Number of stakeholders by gender



team, confirmed the objectives of the MTR and underlined that the interview was voluntary. The tools included questions for each informant.

All KII and FGD data was entered electronically by the Consultant Team into a pre-defined template and uploaded to secure cloud storage.

Data analysis approach

To ensure rigour in the findings from the document review, which included quantitative and qualitative data, and qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs, the Consultant Team conducted triangulation. This involved two stages of data analysis. The first focused on the analysis of each individual dataset and the second on triangulation of findings between datasets where available. Figure A4 provides an overview of the data analysis approach used.

Quantitative data analysis involved the analysis of the secondary quantitative data available from the Secretariat obtained from annual MEL activities, financial data such as annual audited statements for various funds (COMSEC, CYP and CFTC), management accounts and HR data. Qualitative data from documentation was analysed in terms of topic coding. **Primary data analysis** was conducted in two stages: formatting of qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs then coding by topic.

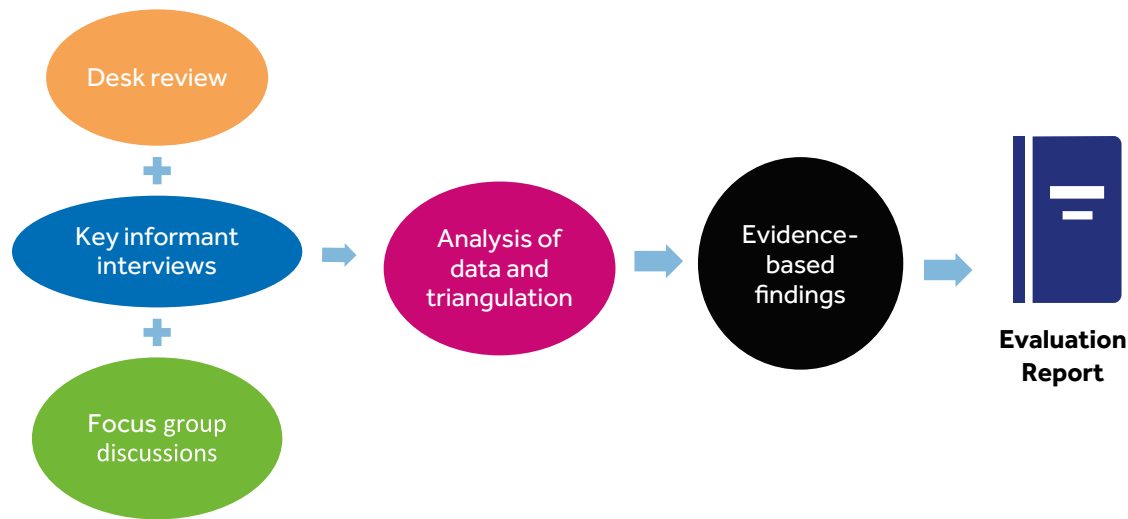
The final stage of analysis was the triangulating of findings from the different data sources. This involved providing consolidated, evidence-based, findings on the Evaluation Questions by cross-checking the analysed data from different sources within a type of data and across different types of data. Triangulation enabled the revisiting of the findings against the Evaluation Questions to ensure further verification and their evidence-based nature, which helped the Consultant Team revisit or consolidate the qualitative or quantitative data analysis of the previous stage. The available evidence was articulated during the reporting of findings.

The findings led to draft conclusions and recommendations by the Consultant Team. These will be reviewed and discussed with SPPDD and SMC and further contextualised and enhanced for operationalisation. This will maximise the utilisation and ownership of the findings from the MTR.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were applied throughout the evaluation. At the beginning of each interview, a privacy statement was read out informing interviewees on the objectives of the interview and the MTR, the voluntary nature of the interview, how the data would be used and the guarantee

Figure C4. Overview of data analysis approach



Source: Authors.

of anonymity. The collection of personal data was minimised. The interviews were conducted in settings where interviewees felt comfortable without the presence of staff outside the programme team. FGDs were conducted with staff from the same directorate to encourage comfortable expression. All findings presented in the report are anonymised. All KII and FGD data was entered electronically by the team into a pre-defined template and uploaded to secure cloud storage. Once data analysis was complete, the interview scripts were deleted.

Annex D. Strategic Implementation Portfolio

	Democracy and Governance	Sustainable Development	Resilience and Climate Action	Small and other vulnerable states
Strategic Outcomes	Greater adherence to Commonwealth values and principles of advancement of good governance	Sustainable and inclusive economic and social development	Climate-resilient and low-carbon development to respond to climate and ocean emergencies	Small and other vulnerable states' needs and concerns addressed in global governance
Intermediate Outcomes	<p>1.1 Member countries effectively utilise mechanisms to further adherence of Commonwealth values and principles¹</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>1.1.1 Countering Violent Extremism</p> <p>1.1.2 Good Offices Conflict Prevention</p> <p>1.1.2 Inclusive Dialogue and Women's Political Participation</p> <p>1.1.4 Political Analysis, Advice and Engagement on Regional Consensus Building</p> <p>1.2 Member countries conduct fair, credible and inclusive elections</p> <p>Project:</p> <p>1.2.1 Strengthening Electoral Process Through Full Cycle Approach</p> <p>1.3 Public institutions and frameworks in member countries strengthened to promote rule of law, access to justice, human rights and good governance</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>1.3.1 Rule of Law Frameworks</p> <p>1.3.2 Justice Frameworks</p> <p>1.3.3 Consensus Building Frameworks</p> <p>1.3.4 Cyber Frameworks</p> <p>1.3.5 Office of Criminal Justice Reform</p> <p>1.3.6 Human Rights Framework</p> <p>1.3.7 Anti-Corruption</p> <p>1.3.8 Strengthening of Public Administration</p>	<p>2.1 Effective trade policy, increased competitiveness and cooperation</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>2.1.1 Trade Competitiveness</p> <p>2.1.2 International Trade Policy</p> <p>2.1.3 Connectivity Agenda</p> <p>2.2 Sustainable public finance and debt management</p> <p>2.2.1 Promoting international sound practice in public debt management</p> <p>2.2.2 Strengthening public debt management framework and developing government bond market</p> <p>2.3 Sustainable, equitable, transparent and effective management, governance and use of the ocean, energy and natural resources</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>2.3.1 Natural Resources</p> <p>2.3.2 Ocean Governance and Maritime Boundaries</p> <p>2.4 Inclusive and resilient education and health systems</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>2.4.1 Health security and resilience</p> <p>2.4.2 Inclusive and resilient education</p> <p>2.4.3 Promoting sport, quality of life and health</p>	<p>3.1 Enhanced Intra-Commonwealth cooperation on sustainable ocean action and energy transition</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>3.1.1 Commonwealth Blue Charter</p> <p>3.1.2 Commonwealth sustainable energy transitional agenda</p> <p>3.2 Enhanced access to financial resources, technology and capacities for climate change adaptation and mitigation</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>3.2.1 Climate Finance Access Hub</p> <p>3.2.2 Commonwealth call to action on living lands</p>	<p>4.1 Policy positions advanced in global governance mechanisms</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>4.1.1 Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting</p> <p>4.1.2 Advocacy strategy for small states</p> <p>4.2 Reduced visibility to shocks and improved fiscal sustainability analysis and publications</p> <p>4.2.1 Supporting fiscal sustainability</p>
Crosscutting	<p>CC1 Effective participation and equal opportunities for youth in leadership, governance, economic and social development enhanced</p> <p>Projects:</p> <p>CC1.1 Youth mainstreaming, participation and inclusion</p>			

Annex E. Detailed Results Framework Progress Update

The Detailed Results Framework presents the Secretariat's reporting against the intermediate outcome indicators agreed with the Board of Governors as part of the performance and results

reporting on the Strategic Plan. It is updated annually as part of the Annual Results Reports to The Board of Governors. Last updated based on Portfolio Management Information as at July 2023.

Table E1 Detailed Results Framework

RAG rating	Target met or exceeded	Good progress	Progress delayed	No Data
1. Democracy and Governance				
Intermediate outcomes	Performance indicator	Baseline 2020/21	Actuals June 2023	Progress rating
1.1 Member countries effectively utilise mechanisms to further adherence of Commonwealth values and principles	Share of engaged member states implementing CMAG and Secretary-General's Good Offices advice	60%	67%	Target met or exceeded
	Number of member countries implementing new or improved mechanisms, policies or programmes to counter violent extremism	0	5	Good progress
1.2 Member countries conduct fair, credible and inclusive elections	Share of member countries engaged through the Secretariat's election programme who implement substantive Commonwealth Observer Recommendations or engage in substantive reform processes	60%	91%	Target met or exceeded
	Share of EMBs implementing recommendations formulated by Commonwealth Elections Professionals to enhance the transparency, credibility and inclusiveness of electoral processes	8%	33%	Progress delayed
CC1 Effective participation and equal opportunities for youth in leadership, governance, economic and social development enhanced	Number of targeted member countries that implement Commonwealth recommended measures to increase youth participation in the political process	17	25	Target met or exceeded

1. Democracy and Governance				
Intermediate outcomes	Performance indicator	Baseline 2020/21	Actuals June 2023	Progress rating
CC2 Gender disparities in access to political, social and economic rights and violence against women and girls reduced	Share of targeted member countries that implement Commonwealth recommended actions to promote equal political representation	30%	25%	Good progress
	Number of targeted member countries implementing Commonwealth advisory guidelines and frameworks to reduce violence against women in politics and elections	1	322	Target met or exceeded
1.3 Public institutions and frameworks in member countries strengthened to promote rule of law, access to justice, human rights and good governance	Number of targeted small and other vulnerable states effectively participating in international human rights mechanisms	8	13	Target met or exceeded
	Number of targeted member countries progressively implementing outcomes from human rights instruments and mechanisms	0	9	Good progress
	Number of targeted member countries with substantially reduced backlog of cases	0	1	Good progress
	Number of targeted member countries implementing improved legal, policy and practice frameworks to address cybercrime	0	5	Target met or exceeded
	Number of targeted member countries with substantially improved legislative drafting and law reform capacity	0	5	Target met or exceeded
	Number of targeted member countries with improved SDG-enabling rule of law frameworks	0	0	Progress delayed
	Number of targeted national anti-corruption bodies demonstrating improved performance	0	13	Target met or exceeded
	Number of targeted member countries implementing Commonwealth recommended reforms in public administration	0	6	Target met or exceeded

2. Sustainable Development				
Intermediate outcomes	Performance indicator	Baseline 2020/21	Actuals June 2023	Progress rating
2.1 Effective trade policy, increased competitiveness and co-operation	Number of targeted member countries implementing Commonwealth recommended export development and trade competitiveness strategies	13	18	Good progress
	Share of Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda cluster decisions with implementation complete or on track	90%	96%	Target met or exceeded
	Number of member countries supported by the Secretariat to implement policy or regulatory initiatives aligned with the Commonwealth Connectivity Action Plan	18	36	Target met or exceeded
	Number of developing country member countries advocating Commonwealth's policy guidance on digital trade and trade and environmental sustainability in multilateral fora	0	40	Target met or exceeded
CC1 Effective participation and equal opportunities for youth in leadership, governance, economic and social development enhanced	Number of supported member countries incorporating youth considerations in trade-related policies and strategies	0	5	Target met or exceeded
CC2 Gender disparities in access to political, social and economic rights and violence against women and girls reduced	Number of supported member countries incorporating gender considerations in trade and trade-related policies and strategies	5	8	Target met or exceeded
2.2. Sustainable public finance and debt management	Number of targeted member countries implementing Commonwealth recommended reforms and policies for debt and public finance management.	2	7	Target met or exceeded
	Number of member countries actively utilising Meridian as their primary/sole tool for debt recording and reporting	5	34	Good progress

2. Sustainable Development				
Intermediate outcomes	Performance indicator	Baseline 2020/21	Actuals June 2023	Progress rating
2.3 Sustainable, equitable, transparent and effective management, governance and use of the ocean, energy and natural resources	Number of targeted member countries implementing Secretariat policy, legal, economic or strategic advice in the sustainable management of their ocean, energy and natural resources	12	14	Target met or exceeded
2.4 Inclusive and resilient health and education systems	Number of targeted member countries implementing Commonwealth regional legal frameworks to address NCDs	12	13	Good progress
	Number of regional/international fora where Commonwealth positions on global health inequalities are reflected	3	9	Target met or exceeded
	Number of member countries implementing policies to reduce disparities and improve education access and outcomes	7	10	Good progress
CC1 Effective participation and equal opportunities for youth in leadership, governance, economic and social development enhanced.	Number of targeted member countries implementing Commonwealth recommended policies to promote economic opportunities for youth	0	5	Target met or exceeded
CC2 Gender disparities in access to political, social and economic rights and violence against women and girls reduced	Number of targeted member countries implementing Commonwealth policies/ frameworks/guidelines to reduce violence against women and girls	1	1	Good progress

3. Resilience and Climate Action				
Intermediate outcomes	Performance indicator	Baseline 2020/21	Actuals June 2023	Progress rating
3.1 Enhanced intra-Commonwealth co-operation on sustainable ocean action and energy transition	Number of Action Group members implementing Commonwealth Blue Charter Action Group commitments	0	11	Target met or exceeded
	Number of member countries engaged with CSET agenda making progress on their sustainable energy transition	0	8	Target met or exceeded
3.2 Enhanced access to financial resources, technology and capacities for climate change adaptation and mitigation	Increased amount of climate finance (US\$) mobilised for member countries through the actions of the CCFAH (cumulative)	US\$43.8m	US\$276.1m	Target met or exceeded
	Number of targeted member countries implementing climate actions through Commonwealth established mechanisms	2	19	Good progress
	Extent of agreement reached on CCALL agenda	0	56	Target met or exceeded
CC1 Effective participation and equal opportunities for youth in leadership, governance, economic and social development enhanced	Number of Commonwealth Blue Charter Action Group members with increased knowledge of youth perspectives in ocean action	1	3	Good progress
	Number of CSET Action Group members promoting energy literacy among children	0	11	Target met or exceeded
	Number of targeted member countries that actively incorporate youth considerations in their implementation strategies to the NDCs	1	11	Target met or exceeded
CC2 Gender disparities in access to political, social and economic rights and violence against women and girls reduced	Number of member countries with increased knowledge of gender issues around sustainable energy	0	2	Good progress
	Number of targeted member countries that actively incorporate gender mainstreaming in their implementation strategies to the NDCs	0	11	Target met or exceeded

4. Small and Other Vulnerable States				
Intermediate outcomes	Performance indicator	Baseline 2020/21	Actuals June 2023	Progress rating
4.1 Small and other vulnerable states' policy positions advanced in global governance mechanisms	Number of key stakeholders that advance Commonwealth positions on small and other vulnerable states	0	5	Target met or exceeded
	Number of international fora that recognise Commonwealth positions on small states in agreement, arrangements and resolutions (e.g. COP, CARICOM, G7, G20, PIF, UN, OECD, World Bank, IMF)	1	5	Target met or exceeded
4.2 Reduced vulnerability to shocks and improved fiscal sustainability and access to financing	Number of small and vulnerable member countries implementing Commonwealth's policy guidance and tools to address resilience	0	2	Good progress

Annex F. Anonymised List of Interviews

Table F1 List of MTR participants consulted

No.	Category	Total
1.	Senior management	6
2.	Secretariat staff	107
3.	High Commission staff	15
	Total	128

Table F2 List of KIs and FGDs

No.	Date	Category	KI no.	Total participants	Male	Female
1	03-Aug-23	Senior management	1	2	2	
2	09-Aug-23	Senior management	2	1	1	
3	09-Aug-23	Senior management	3	1	1	1
4	10-Aug-23	Senior management	4	2	1	
5	05-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	5	4	2	2
6	08-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	6	5	2	3
7	10-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	7	4	4	
8	11-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	8	2	1	1
9	12-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	9	3		3
10	13-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	10	1	1	
11	13-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	11	1	1	
12	13-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	12	2	1	1
13	14-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	13	2		2
14	14-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	14	3	1	2
15	15-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	15	3		3
16	15-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	16	5	3	2
17	15-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	17	7	1	6
18	21-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	18	4	1	3
19	21-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	19	2	2	
20	28-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	20	6	5	1
21	04-Oct-23	Senior management	22	2		2
22	05-Oct-23	Secretariat staff	24	4	4	
23	06-Oct-23	Secretariat staff	26	2	1	1

No.	Date	Category	KII no.	Total participants	Male	Female
24	09-Oct-23	Secretariat staff	27	5	3	2
25	11-Oct-23	Secretariat staff	31	1		1
26	28-Sep-23	Senior management	33	3	1	2
27	22 August 23	Secretariat staff	34	2		2
			FGD no.			
1	26-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	1	10	4	6
2	26-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	2	18	9	9
3	27-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	3	7	5	2
4	28-Sep-23	Secretariat staff	4	10	2	8
			KII no.			
1	29-Sep-23	High Commission	21	1		1
2	04-Oct-23	High Commission	22	2	1	1
3	04-Oct-23	High Commission	23	1	1	
4	05-Oct-23	High Commission	25	1	1	
5	09-Oct-23	High Commission	28	3	1	2
6	11-Oct-23	High Commission	29	1	1	
7	18-Oct-23	High Commission	30	2		2
8	30-Oct-23	High Commission	32	1		1
9	17-Nov-23	High Commission	35	2	2	
10	21-Nov-23	High Commission	36	1		1

Annex G. Context for the Mid-Term Review

The Commonwealth of Nations ('the Commonwealth') is a voluntary, impartial intergovernmental association of 56 independent and equal member countries. The Commonwealth aspires to work together with the shared values and principles of *prosperity, democracy and peace*.² The Commonwealth Secretariat ('the Secretariat') is the administrative arm of the Commonwealth and implements mandates set by Commonwealth Heads of Government. These are planned through Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plans, which run for four years. Members are also supported by two other intergovernmental organisations – the Commonwealth of Learning and the Commonwealth Foundation – as well as more than 80 Commonwealth intergovernmental, civil, cultural and professional organisations.

The recent global crisis are well known. These include the effects of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and 2022 and its aftermath, including loss of jobs, reduced livelihoods, shrinking and slowing economies and global supply chain challenges. The pandemic and recovery have widened existing inequalities. This period has been accompanied by rising conflicts and wars, including the highest level of state-based armed conflicts since the end World War II (UN, 2023), leading to significant economic and social impacts and the displacement of people. The war in Ukraine has affected the global economy through food and energy prices; already high because of the pandemic, these are being pushed further to historic highs.

According to statistics, 89 per cent of least developed countries, 93 per cent of landlocked developing countries and 94 per cent of small island developing states are experiencing food inflation at above 5 per cent and many are seeing above 10 per cent (UNDESA, 2022). These conditions have resulted in a cost-of-living crisis across many countries in the Commonwealth, including growing inflation, increasing public debt and balance of payment concerns (The Commonwealth, 2022; UNDESA, 2022). Many of these factors were

identified as risks in the Strategic Plan TOC (such as risks of increased debt crisis and longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on the global economy reducing fiscal capacity and ability to meet their commitments, as stated in paragraph 35.

Countries have had to react to the extraordinary situation and divert resources for energy subsidies, food and fertiliser subsidies and support for priority labour market programmes. Several central banks have tightened monetary policy. This has driven up global exchange rates, particularly for the US dollar, which has implications for other countries that have to import fuel, food, fertiliser and other commodities in US dollars. High inflation, the high US dollar, rising interest rates, historically high levels of debt and high debt servicing costs have narrowed the fiscal resources available to many countries. Countries face difficult choices owing to the very limited fiscal space they operate in. This has had significant implications for development initiatives.

For example, in terms of global progress towards the SDGs, there are alarming trends, with very few SDGs close to target and the majority a moderate distance to target or far from target (UN, 2023). A number of SDG targets have also seen a backward trend in progress for the period 2020–2023 (ibid.). These include SDG target 2.1.2 on achieving food security, SDG target 8.1.1 on sustainable economic growth, SDG target 13.2.2 on reducing global greenhouse gas emissions and SDG target 15.5.1 on preventing extinction of species (ibid.). With substantial pressure on funding and significant economic, social and environmental challenges, the competition for development funding is very high. This 'era of crisis' frames the context within which the Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 is being implemented.

2 Please refer to <https://thecommonwealth.org/>

Annex H. Mid-Term Review: Evaluation Questions

Based on the MTR TOR, five main Evaluation Questions and several sub-questions were developed in conjunction with the Evaluation Team and finalised during the inception period. These are provided below.

Evaluation Question 1. How successful has the organisation been in planning, delivery, monitoring, evaluation and learning?

1a. How are the planning and programming outcomes relevant to the needs of the member countries, and aligned to global development agendas?

1b. How do the delivery approaches (including innovations, partnerships, HR, Finance) enable the implementation of the Strategic Plan and Annual Delivery Plans?

1c. How do the communication approaches of the Secretariat support successful delivery of the Strategic Plan?

1d. How does the organisation engage with reporting, monitoring, evaluation and learning and do these contribute to effective decision making?

Evaluation Question 2. How can the approaches to planning, prioritisation and resource reallocation be improved?

2a. How can the planning process be better aligned with budgeting and funding realities?

2b. How are CHOGM mandates embedded appropriately in Delivery Plans?

2c. How can the competitive advantages of the Commonwealth be better leveraged in planning, prioritisation, and resource allocation?

Evaluation Question 3. What progress has been made in the implementation of the Strategic Plan Evaluation recommendations (for 2017/18 – 2020/21) and what have been the challenges?

3a. What has been the progress in the implementation of the Evaluation recommendations?

3b. What have been the barriers and challenges to the implementation of the recommendations?

Evaluation Question 4. To what extent are the Secretariat's impact pathways relevant and effective?

4a. How do the impact pathways add value to planning and delivery of the Strategic Plan?

Evaluation Question 5. What have been the main achievements in terms of outcomes?

5a. What has been the progress in the achievement of the intermediate outcomes?

5b. What are the achievements in terms of strategic outcomes and other emerging impact?

5c. What have been the main barriers to the achievement of outcomes and are there any lessons?

Mid-Term Review of the Strategic Plan
2021/22–2024/25

Management Response and Action Plan

Preparation coordinated by	SPPD Directorate
Signed by	Katherine Marshall Kissoon Head, Strategy, Evaluation and Learning
Date	21 June 2024
Reviewed and approved by	Senior Management Committee
Through	Deborah Jamieson, Chief of Staff and Senior Director, SPPDD

Overall comments

The Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the Strategic Plan has provided an opportunity for the Secretariat to take stock of its progress in implementing the Strategic Plan, which delivers on the mandates set by Commonwealth Heads of Government. The Report focuses particularly on the Secretariat's internal operations and organisational enablers in planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), communication, partnerships and human resource management and development. The MTR recognises the significant challenges to implementation during this strategic period as a result of COVID-19 and its lingering health, social and economic impacts at global and national levels.

The Secretariat's Senior Management Committee (SMC) is encouraged by the Report's affirmation of strong progress in meeting outcome targets across all the strategic pillars. This has been propelled by robust and efficient budget utilisation and planning practices, improved alignment between project actions and intermediate outcomes, and a continued focus on high-quality delivery of technical, political and capacity-building services and knowledge products to our member countries.

The MTR rightly points to areas where there has been good progress but also where there remains room for improvement. With the recent appointment of new leadership in Partnerships, Communications and Human Resources, the Secretariat expects to further build on its good performance over the coming years.

Senior Management recognises the utility and benefits of sound a M&E framework and information to ensure continual improvement, good decision-making and effective management practices.

After careful discussion, the SMC has conveyed broad agreement with the 11 recommendations set out in the Report. In response to these, Management has identified 16 actions to implement the recommendations and strengthen the Secretariat as it concludes this strategic period and looks to the next.

The Secretariat acknowledges and appreciates the consultants for their work.

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The Secretariat acknowledges and appreciates the consultants for their work.

Recommendation 1:

As mandates represent important guidance for planning and help the Secretariat's technical teams stay on track and prioritise impactful interventions, clearer definitions and operationalisation of mandates are needed for the remainder of the Strategic Plan's implementation and future Strategic Plans.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		<p>The Secretariat agrees with this recommendation. It is notable that recent deliberations at the Board level and in the Informal Working Groups of the Board have also highlighted the need for clearer communication on the defining and operationalisation of mandates. Mandates are determined by Commonwealth leaders, who meet biannually at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs). The Secretariat functions to implement these mandates, and this is operationalised through the Strategic Plan and the Annual Delivery Plans.</p> <p>The Secretariat acknowledges the need to ensure its internal and external stakeholders are fully cognisant of its planning and delivery approaches and the parameters for its prioritisation decisions.</p> <p>The Secretariat's CHOGM Planning team is accordingly revisiting the framework for securing and implementing the mandates. This is being done to ensure clear definitions and more effective operationalisation and will be subject to review and agreement by Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministers and Commonwealth Heads of Government in accordance with the organisation's governance arrangement.</p>			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
1.1	The Secretariat will communicate clarity on the identification and role of mandates in the Secretariat's planning and implementation processes.	October 2024	Director, SGO	Choose an item.	
1.2	The Internal Onboarding and Induction programmes are being updated to include components on the Secretariat's values, mission and vision, as well as information on mandates and their linkages to programme work and the Secretariat's strategic direction.	September 2024	Director, HRFM	Choose an item.	

Recommendation 2:

(i) To adapt to the changing operational environment while remaining relevant and strategic and safeguarding quality, the Secretariat should develop a framework and procedural mechanism to guide programmes in the prioritisation of projects for inclusion in the Annual Delivery Plans based on realistic budget assumptions. This framework can build on existing mechanisms, such as the Development Assistance Committee process for evaluating member country requests.

(ii) The Secretariat should provide transparent communications and reporting on the outcomes of the prioritisation process internally and to the Board through the Delivery Plans.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		<p>The Secretariat has identified criteria for priority-setting and these are embedded and communicated in the Annual Delivery Plans and include CHOGM mandates; delivery to small and vulnerable states; interventions in areas where the Secretariat has comparative advantage; a sound delivery mechanism; and good value for money; as well as potential for impact and innovation, including through leveraging partnership. These criteria are operationalised at the project level where budgets are approved.</p> <p>The Informal Working Groups of the Board of Governors have also discussed the need for the Secretariat to develop a prioritisation framework, for approval by the Board, as part of the strategic planning process.</p>			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
2.1	The Secretariat will consolidate its current priority-setting mechanisms to better document and communicate how prioritisation decisions are informed.	July 2025	Deputy Secretary-General	Choose an item.	

Recommendation 3:

The Board of Governors should consider the implementation of a multi-year planning and budgeting cycle to achieve efficiency gains through greater predictability in the availability of committed funds, realistic implementation timelines and sustained results-focused implementation. A multi-year planning cycle would also allow for better integration with the Strategic Plan focus on outcomes and greater efficiencies in delivery planning.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		<p>This has been discussed in the Informal Working Groups of the Board of Governors as part of the initial deliberations on the new Strategic Plan development. This recommendation has also come up in previous evaluations and the Secretariat's own internal reviews.</p> <p>This recommendation would need to be addressed by the Board of Governors.</p>			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
3.1	The Board of Governors will communicate member countries' decisions on approval of a multi-year planning approach to inform the new Strategic Plan.	October 2025	Deputy Secretary-General	Choose an item.	

Recommendation 4:

To improve the sustainable financing of the Strategic Plan, the Secretariat should establish a dedicated support structure and strategy for resource mobilisation with capacity and expertise in fundraising, business development and targeting strategic partnerships.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		<p>The Secretariat recognises the need for more sustainable financing of its programmes and has successfully mobilised extra-budgetary resources to deliver for member countries over the current Strategic Plan period, emphasising the potential to build on this performance in the new Strategic Plan. However, there are further opportunities to increase efficiency and effectiveness in this regard. The Secretariat is therefore currently reviewing practices and relevant processes across the organisation. The outcome of this internal review process will inform more precisely the organisational structure appropriate for more efficient resource mobilisation.</p>			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
4.1	Review, develop and communicate the organisation's approach to resource mobilisation and strategic partnerships through leveraging and building on existing capabilities and lessons learnt.	July 2025	Senior Director, SPPDD	Choose an item.	

Recommendation 5:

(i) Develop a Strategic Plan Theory of Change (TOC) that describes the causal relationship from inputs including clearly defined resources, to outputs, to intermediate and strategic outcomes and impact in line with best practices to address the gaps identified in Chapter 3 of the MTR. This TOC can be piloted during the remainder of the Strategic Plan period and used during the end-of-term review of the Strategic Plan.

(ii) Strengthen the existing organisational TOC by including an articulation of the Secretariat's vision, mission and organisational values.

Management response		PARTIALLY ACCEPTED			
		The current organisational TOC in the Strategic Plan represented a first step in articulating how the Secretariat will deliver for member countries over the strategic period. The organisation's vision is informed through deliberation of Heads of Government. The Secretariat's mission and values are as set out in the Commonwealth Charter and memorandum. The organisational TOC made reference to these links. Further, the TOC approach has informed programme-level strategies and guides M&E plans. This strategic period has provided an opportunity for the Secretariat to learn from these approaches and these lessons will inform the next Strategic Plan. The Secretariat will revisit its organisational TOC at that time.			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
5.1	Review and update the organisational TOC in the context of planning for the new Strategic Plan.	July 2025	Senior Director, SPPDD		

Recommendation 6:

The Secretariat needs to review the practical value of the impact pathways in describing and monitoring the Secretariat's Strategic Plan outcomes. The Secretariat should in the interim better utilise and communicate the pathways through staff training, monitoring and reporting processes, and cross-sectoral learning.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		The Secretariat agrees on the need to continually review its approaches with a view to improving their effectiveness. This review and learning process is embedded within current monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes and communicated and revisited through semi-annual discussions with programme teams as part of their monitoring and results reporting. Lessons from the review of current MEL strategy and approaches, including the impact pathways, will be implemented in the context of the new Strategic Plan from 2025.			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
6.1	Better communicate and embed the impact pathways as a framework for informing programme strategies and reporting.	July 2025	Senior Director, SPPDD	Choose an item.	

Recommendation 7:

The Secretariat has dedicated a great deal of effort to elaborate and detailed reporting, though there remain crucial reporting gaps covering the achievement of strategic outcomes, impact, lessons learnt and challenges. It is critical that the Secretariat streamline MEL and the reporting system to address data gaps and better describe the benefits that member countries are gaining. The Secretariat should:

- i. Review, consolidate and simplify MEL tools to focus on its core objectives of supporting informed decision-making and policies, particularly around the generation of outcomes and impact.
- ii. Update the Detailed Results Framework (DRF) to define and capture major outputs, outcomes and impact based on the remaining programme of work. Incorporate qualitative indicators and adapt best practices in defining SMART indicators.
- iii. Pilot the updated DRF if feasible for the remaining period of the Strategic Plan period. This would enable establishment of a robust approach for the next Strategic Plan that provides greater accountability for the use of member country funds to create impact and demonstrate value.
- iv. Identify mechanisms to assess strategic outcome and impact, including possibly by focusing country evaluations on these themes. Strengthen capacities to evaluate outcomes and impact through the development of relevant tools and skills. This can be part of the longitudinal data collection to capture strategic outcomes and impact over a 10-year period and support decision-making and planning.

Management response**PARTIALLY ACCEPTED**

The Secretariat acknowledges the need for continual review and improvement of its processes, and this has been integral to its MEL practices. Several actions are already underway to address the actions noted in this recommendation and ensure a MEL framework that is appropriate to the portfolio, capabilities and needs of the organisation. However, it would not be prudent to pursue items (ii) and (iii) at this stage of the Strategic Plan given the timeline to the next plan. Deeper actions to refine performance and results frameworks and improve the outcome orientation and impact of the portfolio are being developed and tested and will be rolled out as part of the new Strategic Plan from 2025.

Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
7.1	Develop mechanisms to address the need for better outcome and impact information on the Secretariat's programmes.	July 2025	Senior Director, SPPDD	Choose an item.	

Recommendation 8:

Learning processes are viewed as silo-based and there are gaps in learning around the generation of outcomes and impact. To improve learning processes and leverage the benefits for the implementation of the Strategic Plan, the Secretariat should:

- i. Review Quarterly Progress Reviews) QPRs and identify mechanisms to focus on exchange of best practices across directorates, cross-sectoral synergies and addressing institutional inefficiencies.
- ii. Consider undertaking progress reviews on a six-monthly basis instead of quarterly.
- iii. Develop mechanisms and processes to capture learning from the delivery of activities.
- iv. Ensure MEL plans (in Programme Strategy Documents – PSDs) include learning outputs and outcomes, which can be included in the proposed six-monthly progress reviews.
- v. Share six-monthly learning information across technical leads.
- vi. Conduct outcome and impact learning events on an annual basis.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		<p>The Secretariat is committed to better utilising M&E information to inform organisational learning, reporting and decision-making. In this regard, current learning approaches are also continually under review to ensure that opportunities for learning are identified and maximised and that relevant processes are streamlined.</p> <p>The Secretariat acknowledges that formal and informal opportunities for improved utilisation of performance review and M&E information can be further developed.</p>			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
8.1	Review and synthesise findings on how M&E information and practices can be better utilised for learning	October 2024	Senior Director, SPPDD	Choose an item.	
8.2	Incorporate all aspects of learning review into the learning and organisational development segment within Human Resources to create a structured approach to learning frameworks, monitoring and synergy-building across the organisation.	October 2024	Director, HRFM		

Recommendation 9:

The Secretariat can address communication gaps as follows:

- i. Implement more open communication activities as part of internal communication to foster better working relationships between the various levels of the Secretariat and facilitate more effective information-sharing approaches. Simple but impactful activities can include Town Hall Meetings that facilitate dissemination of information on a directorate level, Brown Bag Sessions with heads of directorates or Tuesday Tea with the Deputy Secretary-General and or monthly meets with the Secretary-General to encourage creative collaborations and learning.
- ii. Decisions on budget allocations and the outcomes of SMC discussions should take place in a transparent manner to help staff understand the rationale for decisions.
- iii. Moreover, to support the delivery of the Strategic Plan, it is necessary to align the communication approach in the Annual Delivery Plans to the overall implementation and MEL realities of the Secretariat.
- iv. Regarding external communications, to mobilise national awareness and support for the delivery of the Strategic Plan, the Secretariat would benefit from a thematic and country-focused communication strategy.
- v. Reinforce the role of the regional heads in enabling effective communications between programme teams and member countries. This will call for enhancing processes for information flow between programme teams and regional desk officers on country-level activities.
- vi. Conduct country, subregional and regional engagement events (informal), including hosting by member countries to strengthen country, sub-regional and regional engagements and the coherence and dissemination of materials such as regional or sub-regional e-newsletters.
- vii. Consolidate communication processes between the Secretariat and various member country contact points including HCs, ministries of foreign affairs, ministries of finance/planning and line ministries where possible.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		The MTR has highlighted significant progress in strengthening the Secretariat's Communications function, practices and mechanisms, to address the diverse informational needs of the Secretariat's stakeholders. The wide-ranging actions recommended for consideration reflect this diversity. While the Secretariat broadly accepts this recommendation, it is also mindful of the need to appropriate the organisation's resources efficiently.			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
9.1	Consolidate progress and address the needs of internal and external audiences through a communications strategy that identifies key messages and actions to engage stakeholders and elevate the Commonwealth's messaging and brand.	July 2025	Director, Communications	Choose an item.	

Key actions (continued)		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
9.2	Update the organisational development calendar to incorporate multiple elements on culture, staff wellbeing and communications, including as recommended.	October 2024	Director, HRFM		

Recommendation 10:

To allow for feedback that can inform staff engagement and improve staff morale, the Secretariat can undertake a staff engagement exercise through, for example, an anonymous survey, a Town Hall Session or another mechanism, to identify factors that can improve staff retention and address perceived barriers to job satisfaction.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		The Secretariat accepts this recommendation, and its human resource development approach underscores the importance of an engaged, motivated and productive workforce. The Human Resources Division is currently reviewing and updating of its Human Resources Strategy under the leadership of a new director. This will embed the key principles of purpose, people, policy and processes and clarify how the Secretariat's value proposition informs expected competencies of staff. These principles will also drive forward engagement with staff to ensure there are open lines of communications at all levels.			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
10.1	Conduct at least two Town Halls annually as part of staff engagement	Month Year	Director, HRFM	Choose an item.	
10.2	Finalise and communicate the revised Human Resources Strategy.	October 2024	Director, HRFM	Choose an item.	

Recommendation 11:

The Secretariat can strengthen the role of partnerships as an accelerator for the Strategic Plan as follows:

- i. For the rest of the current Strategic Plan period, staffing for the Partnership and Innovation section needs to be filled, so that capacity to leverage support for the implementation of the Strategic Plan can be mobilised.
- ii. Moreover, selection of accredited organisations that directly support the implementation of the Strategic Plan might be prioritised so that accredited organisations can be mobilised better towards implementation of the Strategic Plan.
- iii. Expand the current records on Secretariat MOUs to include information on core thematic priorities, regional and national experience, regional and national focal points, and funding opportunities.

Management response		ACCEPTED			
		<p>The Secretariat has recognised within the Strategic Plan that partnerships is a cross-cutting organisational enabler critical to the delivery of its mandates, and has taken key steps, as noted in the MTR, to strengthen this function.</p> <p>The Secretariat is undertaking a needs assessment and gap analysis of its Partnerships function and strategy to inform its priorities and enable it to take action on strengthening its existing partnerships.</p> <p>The lists of current memoranda of understanding have been reviewed and updated and communicated internally so that programme staff seeking partnerships can build on existing relationships. A re-accreditation process is currently underway to assess the continued relevance and alignment of the Commonwealth accredited organisations. This is to identify an updated list of accredited organisations able to co-deliver or collaborate in support of the Strategic Plan.</p>			
Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
11.1	Streamline the staffing of the Partnerships Unit to ensure capacity for delivery.	October 2024	Senior Director, SPPDD	Choose an item.	
11.2	Review and revise the Secretariat's Partnerships Strategy.	July 2025	Senior Director, SPPDD		

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