

Second Report of the High Level Group on the Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat



December 2018

Cover page image copyright © of shutterstock.com

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Executive Summary | 1 |
| I | 12 |
| 1.1 | 12 |
| 1.2 | 12 |
| 1.3 | 13 |
| 1.4 | 14 |
| II | 14 |
| 2.1 | 14 |
| 2.2 | 18 |
| 2.2 (a) | 18 |
| 2.2 (b) | 24 |
| 2.2 (c) | 30 |
| Appendix 1 - List of Commonwealth Organizations Consulted | 28 |
| Appendix 2 – Selected List of Reference Documents Consulted | 29 |

Executive Summary

This report is the second of two reports¹ by the High Level Group (HLG) mandated to update and clarify the governance arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat to “ensure that they are streamlined and integrated in order to improve oversight, efficiency and transparency.”² Whereas the first report dealt with matters of governance related to accountability and transparency; roles and responsibilities of the Secretariat’s governing bodies; and funding among other things, this report is concerned with three additional areas, specifically: (a) the arrangements for accreditation and partnerships for new stakeholders; (b) the need for greater levels of collaboration among accredited organizations and between those organizations and the Commonwealth Secretariat; and (c) the need for enhanced approaches and mechanisms in addressing areas of global significance, more importantly areas which impact Commonwealth members.

The High Level Group approached this second report with the objective of understanding from Commonwealth stakeholders, and in particular the family or network of Commonwealth accredited organizations, the main governance issues for the three areas addressed in this report. The HLG also sought to have those very same stakeholders contemplate possible solutions for addressing the concerns and/or gaps in the governance arrangements which they identified.

The governance arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat concerning collaborating and partnering with Commonwealth accredited organizations, and also concerning engaging in areas of global significance are, to an extent, a reflection of the changing global context within which the Commonwealth now exists and operates. In this environment Commonwealth values continue to endure but the Commonwealth Secretariat is forced to consider how best to renew its franchise value not only to Commonwealth member governments but now, also to the wider sets of stakeholders, in particular Commonwealth organizations. At the same time, there is a need for accredited organizations to reaffirm or establish their relevance with regards to contemporary issues challenging Commonwealth members and stakeholders, or to the Commonwealth charter, or both.

Commonwealth organizations tend to identify differently (there are inter-governmental organizations as well as civil society organizations), come in all sizes and from all regions of the Commonwealth, and with equally diverse organizational capacities, operational expertise and strategic mandates and roles. Their individual and combined reach across the commonwealth is substantial, and the scope of their engagement is likewise far-reaching. Commonwealth organizations now represent a significant component of and continue to play a valuable role within the

¹ The first report of the High Level Group (HLG) was submitted to Commonwealth Foreign Ministers for their consideration in September 2018. The approach contemplating two reports was agreed by the Chair-in-Office and this communicated to the Chair of the HLG in a letter date 22 May, 2018.

² Terms of Reference for the High Level Group

Commonwealth. Moreover, their work of empowering popular movements and networks and improving the quality of their inclusion is more closely rooted in the Commonwealth of peoples.

Against the backdrop of a constantly shifting international environment organizations accredited to the Commonwealth continue to be recognized as invaluable for extending the reach and scope of the Commonwealth. Many accredited organizations have strategic mandates and programs that are similar to, or complement, that of the Secretariat, and bring a wealth of organizational assets, capacities, connections (i.e. networks) and experiences that can be leveraged by the latter. Yet in seeking accreditation organizations are not required to demonstrate a ‘commitment-to-purpose’, and are expected only to advocate Commonwealth values and principles. Moreover, the current business model of today’s Commonwealth Secretariat has failed to lead to accredited organizations being engaged more effectively as partners in delivering on the strategic priorities. At the same time, the Secretariat has failed to serve more effectively as a convening body for accredited organizations in areas of global significance. As a result, accredited organizations have functioned more as nominal partners and collaboration with the Secretariat remains transactional at best. In addition, there is a deep chasm between the two in terms of what the Secretariat reports it is doing for the benefit of accredited organizations and to involve them in the work of the Commonwealth; and what the latter have expressed is their real experience.

Main Findings:

The key findings of the High Level Group for this second report are discussed below, along with the key recommendations of the Group for addressing the identified gaps and weaknesses.

A Governance Arrangements for Accreditation to the Commonwealth

Accreditation to the Commonwealth is governed by the Guidelines adopted by the Board of Governors and administered by the Accreditation Committee, which is a subcommittee of the Board. As currently established, the criteria for accreditation involves a single-tiered process for achieving eligibility. In addition, the Guidelines require only that organizations, amongst other things, show a commitment to Commonwealth fundamental values and principles; demonstrate recognition and respect for the diversity of the Commonwealth’s membership and also a track record of activity for a period of at least two years. The Guidelines do not require the establishment of deep alignment at the strategic and operational levels which can produce the types of synergistic relationships between the Secretariat and accredited organizations that reflect the current standing of the latter across and within today’s Commonwealth, and which can help to mutually extend each other’s reach and scope. Accreditation is not automatic but the process needs to be strengthened. Presently more than eighty organizations are accredited to the Commonwealth. These are divided into basic categories but clearer definitions for these categories are required. This would allow for customized packages of benefits to be offered to different categories of accredited organizations. There is also a need to establish criteria

for regional accreditation, and these should be consistent with the conditions for full accreditation.

With these broad objectives established, the HLG hereby propose the following concerning accreditation of organizations to the Commonwealth:

Recommendations:

1. *The Board of Governors should*

I. *establish a new framework for accreditation of Commonwealth organizations. This should ideally:*

(a) *adopt clear definitions for the various categories of Commonwealth accredited organizations, in particular for associated organizations as different from other types of civil society organizations, and the Guidelines for Accreditation should be amended to reflect this.³*

(b) *reserve full accredited organization status for entities that are pan-Commonwealth in focus, have values and principles aligned with the Commonwealth's as expressed in the Commonwealth Charter, **and** demonstrate commitment to addressing the priorities of the Commonwealth;*

(c) *strengthen the process for accreditation by*

(i) *establishing a two-tiered approach for considering applications from interested organizations: a first tiered setting out pre-requisites which organizations must meet in order to be eligible for their applications for accreditation to be advanced; and, a second tier setting out the criteria on which eligible organizations will be evaluated; and*

(ii) *establish systematic five-yearly periodic accreditation reviews,⁴ and link this to the current mechanisms for suspension and exit while also strengthening those provisions.*

(d) *strengthen the criteria for accreditation to the Commonwealth by*

(i) *adding a requirement for organizations to show that they are registered in a Commonwealth country;*

(ii) *adding a further requirement for organizations to show that they have achieved a degree of sustainability;⁵*

³ The HLG is aware that the Accreditation Committee has been considering this matter and therefore urges that this work be completed at the earliest.

⁴ Five-yearly periodic accreditation reviews would place a requirement on accredited organizations that they continue to strongly conform to B and D, and that their own organizational values and principles continue to align strongly with those of the Commonwealth.

- (iii) *requiring accredited organizations to demonstrate transparency in their decision-making processes (Section 3.3.1); and*
- (iv) *clarifying that the track record of organizational activity (Section 3.5.1) must reflect strong alignment with the strategic priorities of the Commonwealth.*

2. *The Guidelines for Accreditation should be amended to*

- (a) *provide for a separate section on Regional Accreditation. The criteria for regional accreditation should ideally be consistent with the criteria for full accreditation but take into consideration the fact that organizations will have a less than pan-Commonwealth focus.*
- (b) *Differentiate the benefits of accreditation by category of organization.*
- (c) *introduce, under the Section F for Suspension and exit, mechanisms for graduating accredited organizations that no longer fully meet the criteria set out under Section B of the Guidelines. This heading of this section should also be changed to read as Graduation, Suspension and Exit*
- (d) *clarify the process for dealing with organizations that become unsustainable due to financial or other grounds (Section F.9). For instance, accredited organizations could provisionally have their accredited status suspended for an initial period of two years but would be eligible for reinstatement by the end of this period subject to their demonstrating that they organization has been placed back on sustainable footing.*

B Governance Arrangements for Collaboration and Partnerships

The need for strengthening collaboration between the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth accredited organizations has long been recognized⁵ and the relationship between the two valued by the Commonwealth. The contributions of civil society and accredited organizations to promoting Commonwealth values and principles are enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter and other strategic documents of the Secretariat, and this is reaffirmed by repeat CHOGM Communiqués, the Secretariat's Strategic Plan and also its Partnership Strategy. Yet, accredited organizations feel increasingly disenfranchised by the Commonwealth Secretariat; excluded from key decision-

⁵ This can be through measures such as showing that at least 20% of their total annual budgets are financed from their own sources, as an example.

⁶ As testament of this, in the 1980s the Commonwealth Foundation was empowered to take on a convening role on behalf of Commonwealth accredited organizations.

making processes; and that they are lacking important systematic access to Secretariat senior staff and also its governing bodies. The Secretariat has shown documents which indicate that it has put in place a number of initiatives aimed at strengthening collaboration with accredited organizations, including (a) periodic dialogues with the Secretary-General; (b) adoption of a new Partnerships Strategy; and (c) establishment of an Innovation Hub. However, there is little evidence that these have been fully implemented or are working properly, and there remains a deep divide in the relationship between the Commonwealth Secretariat and accredited organizations. Moreover, the relationship is asymmetrical and of a transactional nature thereby restricting accredited organizations from engaging more effectively with the Secretariat, including at a deeper strategic level. Thus, there is an urgent need to transform the current relationships into more collaborative partnerships. The problem is not necessarily due to a lack of structures or platforms for engagement but rather seems to have to do more with how recent initiative have been operationalized; and also with organizational attitudes – including over the Secretariat’s shift to the use of digital platforms for managing partnerships, personal egos, and personality conflicts.

Considering these factors, the High Level Group recommends that

1. *The Partnerships Strategy continue to serve as the overall framework for guiding the Secretariat’s engagement with accredited organizations;*
2. *The current platforms for dialogue and engagement between the Commonwealth Secretariat and accredited organizations be strengthened and expanded.* For instance, accredited organizations should have regular and systematic access to other senior staff of the Secretariat in between the periodic dialogues with the Secretary General; and, also regular opportunities to dialogue with the Board of Governors.
3. *The Commonwealth Secretariat*
 - (i) *Adopt consultative approaches with the accredited organizations earlier in their strategic planning processes.* To the extent possible the relationships between the Secretariat and accredited organizations should move beyond simply aligning work streams *ex post* (i.e. transactional partnerships) and instead seek to establish real synergies (i.e. collaborative partnerships) for the purpose of jointly delivering on the priority objectives of the Commonwealth. The two are linked but engender substantively different approaches.
 - (ii) *Act more effectively as a convening power for Commonwealth accredited organizations, while building their capacity to deliver on Commonwealth priorities and enhancing their visibility, and also their access to information and knowledge.* To that end the Secretariat should continue to assist accredited organizations with navigating the

Innovation Hub, and also provide training and technical support to them including on using this platform as a vehicle for enhancing their own visibility.

- (iii) *Ensure that Marlborough House is available to accommodate the Commonwealth Hub for accredited organizations – i.e. that they have the physical space to operate from there, and that “the site and its outbuildings are reconfigured into an accessible and welcoming central zone of Commonwealth unity.”*

C Governance Arrangements for Commonwealth Engagement in areas of Global Significance

The Commonwealth’s engagement in areas of global significance is guided by two main sources: the priorities set out in its Charter; and the decisions of Commonwealth Heads of Government as set out in CHOGM Communiqués. The attention of the latter changes every two years and the outcomes invariably expand the role and scope for the Commonwealth, and consequently the Secretariat is left needing to address a seemingly ever-expanding list of ‘priorities’, even as its finances are declining. This has led to growing concerns over the Commonwealth’s focus being increasingly diluted, and it is not clear that the Secretariat is consistently adding value and/or making a difference in areas of global concern where it is really important for the Commonwealth to do so. Meanwhile, the Secretariat lacks adequate awareness of and information on the work of accredited organizations in the diverse areas and this potentially further dilutes the impact of the wider Commonwealth. The immediate and long term challenge for the Secretariat then is twofold: on one hand it has to effectively assist Commonwealth Heads of Government (at CHOGM) with prioritizing a limited number of key global issues of concern to Commonwealth countries (both current and emerging), while strengthening its ability to add value and influence developments in such areas.⁷ Put differently, the aim is, or should be, for the Commonwealth Secretariat to re-establish itself as being the voice of the Commonwealth and to be able “to speak with one voice on particular issues” yet capture the diversity of its membership and stakeholders on those issues.

Taking these aims into consideration, the HLG recommends the following:

- 1. The Commonwealth Secretariat should assist Commonwealth Heads of Government to prioritize a limited number of global issues (current and emerging) that are of concern to the Commonwealth and which require decision-making at their bi-annual meetings.*
- 2. The Commonwealth Secretariat should continuously identify emerging areas relevant to its mandate that are consistent with its comparative*

⁷ This point of influencing developments was identified by Australia. See Submission by Australia on the Second Report of the High Level Group on Governance of the Commonwealth Secretariat, November 2018

advantages and which places Commonwealth concerns and approaches at the heart of the relevant agendas.

- 3. The Commonwealth Secretariat should explore and undertake collaborative partnerships which allow for adjacent areas of concern to Commonwealth members and stakeholders (i.e. other issues) to be addressed by its development partners, in particular Commonwealth accredited organizations.*

I Introduction

1.1 Background

This second report of the High Level Group is part of its mandate “to review the full governance arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat to ensure that this is streamlined and integrated in order to improve oversight, efficiency and transparency.”⁸ The decision to provide a first report presenting recommendations to the Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministers Meeting (CFAMM) on the most urgent governance issues (i.e. roles and responsibilities of governing bodies; funding; etc.) followed by a second report covering any wider issues was taken in light of a number of factors in particular the compressed timeframe which the Group had for completing its work, and this approach had the full support and endorsement of the Chair-in-Office.⁹ Following this, Foreign Ministers agreed at their meeting in September on the margins of the 73rd United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that the HLG should complete its second report by the end of 2018, and that this should focus on (a) the arrangements for accreditation and partnerships for new stakeholders; (b) the need for greater levels of collaboration among accredited organizations, and between those organizations and the Commonwealth Secretariat; and (c) the need for enhanced approaches and mechanisms in addressing areas of global significance, more importantly areas which impact Commonwealth members.¹⁰

The High Level Group has, since then, met twice in London to discuss the second report: once in late November, and involving consultations with several accredited organizations as well as the Board of Governors; and then again in mid-December to consider the draft of the second report.¹¹ In between and following the last meeting the Group exchanged views via email, including for revisions, amendments, and recommendations.

1.2 Objectives and Scope

The main objectives of the second report of the High Level Group are, as mentioned above – that is, to consider the governance arrangements concerning accreditation of Commonwealth organizations; collaboration between Commonwealth organizations and the Commonwealth Secretariat; and the engagement of the Commonwealth in areas of global governance. To these ends, the review focused on identifying, among other things, the standing of Commonwealth organizations (i.e. how many are currently accredited; the extent to which they are considered in strategic and/or operational planning and implementation by the Secretariat; etc.); what arrangements are currently in place for engaging them and the efficacy of those arrangements; their concerns regarding partnering and/or working with the Secretariat,

⁸ CHOGM Communique 2015, section 40

⁹ Letter from Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson to Anote Tong, 26 May, 2018

¹⁰ Letter from the Commonwealth Secretary-General to the Chair of the HLG, 19 October, 2018

¹¹ The HLG convened its last meeting on 14th December, 2018

and also among and with each other; and opportunities or prospects for strengthening the Secretariat's engagement in areas of global significance, in particular as it relates to how Commonwealth organizations can add value to addressing areas which impact Commonwealth members.

The principal sources of information for the second report are primarily from key strategic policy documents relevant to Commonwealth accredited organizations (i.e. the Commonwealth's Charter; the Secretariat's current strategic plan; the Guidelines for Accreditation; and the recently adopted Partnership Strategy). They are also from Commonwealth stakeholders themselves, in particular accredited organizations (as identified in their written submissions and/or gleaned from direct consultations and focus-group type sessions); from minutes of the Secretary General's dialogue with accredited organizations; and from the report of accredited organizations meeting with the Committee of the Whole,¹² but also from Commonwealth members (i.e. High Commissions) and Secretariat staff. Other sources consulted include the Commonwealth's website and those of accredited organizations; the Commonwealth Innovation Hub; and various reports including from the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Independent Forum of Commonwealth Organizations.

1.3 Approach and Methodology

The High Level Group approached the review of the governance arrangements for this second report in a similar fashion to the approach for its first report: that is, with the objective of understanding from Commonwealth stakeholders, and in particular, in this case, the family or network of Commonwealth organizations, what the main governance issues are for the three areas prioritized for this report. The HLG also sought to have those very same stakeholders contemplate some possible solutions for addressing the concerns and/or governance deficits identified. This method was deliberate, and part of the objective was to ensure that stakeholders had adequate opportunities for engaging and participating more broadly in the consultative process. Thus, stakeholders were invited and had opportunities for making written submissions, as well as for meeting with the High Level Group members and/or with the staff of its pro tem secretariat.

Consultations took the format of semi-structured direct interviews (in the case of one on one meetings with organizations) and focus-group type meetings, including a consultative meeting between accredited organizations and the High Level Group. Here stakeholders had opportunities to dialogue freely with the High Level Group and to respond to specific questions raised by the Group's members. Some of these consultations took place earlier in the work of the High Level Group (i.e. prior to CHOGM 2018) or more recently (i.e. since the decisions of Foreign Ministers at CFAMM were made known to the HLG). A total of thirty-nine Commonwealth accredited organizations were consulted, of which nine made written submissions.

¹² This meeting took place in 2015

Stakeholder consultations were complemented by documentary reviews, and here various types of documents were consulted, including: (i) those which set out the specific governance arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat, such as for example, the Guidelines for Accreditation and the Partnership Strategy; (ii) those which articulated the strategic priorities of the Secretariat (e.g. the Commonwealth Charter; CHOGM Communiqués; and the Strategic Plan of the Organization) or reported on its initiatives and/or outcomes (e.g. Biennial Reports of the Commonwealth Secretary General and reports of prior high level or eminent person groups); and (iii) other documentary sources relevant to Commonwealth organizations such as minutes of meetings between organizations and the Secretary-General or the Committee of the Whole; the Commonwealth Innovation Hub, and the websites of Commonwealth organizations themselves. The latter often contained digitized copies of annual or project reports, and other information which provided useful insights into the strategic priorities and operational focus, as well as spheres of engagement of respective Commonwealth organizations.

1.4 Structure of the Report

This Second Report is organized into two main sections. First, an Executive Summary provides a synthesis of the main findings along with a summary of the recommendations for addressing the main governance concerns identified. This is followed by the main body of the report which is divided according to the three priority areas and sets out the main findings and key recommendations in more detail. Finally, a couple of appendices provide a list of the organizations which participated in the consultations; and a select list of the reference sources consulted.

II Key Findings & Main Recommendations

This section is divided into two areas: a first which discusses the current operating context for accredited organizations; and a second which discusses the main findings under the three areas of governance.

2.1 Context for Commonwealth Accredited Organizations

The Commonwealth now exists and operates in an often rapidly changing international environment, where member governments and other Commonwealth stakeholders face myriad new challenges. In this still evolving context, Commonwealth values continue to endure even as the Commonwealth Secretariat is compelled to offer renewed, or a new, franchise value not only to Commonwealth member governments but also to the wider Commonwealth family and sets of stakeholders, in particular Commonwealth organizations. The test for today's Secretariat is to establish a business model which facilitates better prioritization of the challenges facing the Commonwealth, improves management of Commonwealth responses, and engages partners more effectively. At the same time, if accredited organizations are to function effectively as partners in addressing Commonwealth priorities, there is a need for them to establish, or to reaffirm, their relevance with regards to contemporary issues challenging Commonwealth members and stakeholders, and to build capacities for addressing these while continuing to demonstrate their commitment to Commonwealth values and

principles. The Commonwealth Charter recognizes this and it calls on the “network of the many intergovernmental, parliamentary, professional and civil society bodies which support the Commonwealth [...] to subscribe and adhere to its values and principles.”¹³

The Charter’s appeal to Commonwealth values and principles (i.e. to a Commonwealth DNA of sorts) is instructive for understanding the links, and also the relationships, between the Commonwealth Secretariat and accredited organizations, and also how the latter fit into the wider Commonwealth family. Commonwealth organizations¹⁴ identify differently (there are inter-governmental organizations as well as civil society organizations – the latter of which can in turn be broken down into further sub-categories), have different memberships, come in all sizes and from all regions of the Commonwealth, and with equally diverse financial and organizational capacities, operational expertise and strategic mandates and roles. And, to the extent that they have their own governance structures and staff, get to decide their own sets of affiliations, are free to coordinate with each other, and get to undertake their own activities and programs they are also autonomous.

Generally, organizations are required to meet a series of criteria in order to be accredited to the Commonwealth. This includes, having a commitment to Commonwealth fundamental values and principles; demonstrating recognition and respect for the diversity of the Commonwealth’s membership; demonstrating transparency in their governance arrangements, decision-making processes and activities, as well as accountability to their members or constituents; and demonstrating a track record of activity for a period of at least two years.¹⁵ Otherwise, accreditation is open to any organization that meets the single tier of requirements; and, it offers a single package of benefits, including: eligibility for access to Marlborough House for meetings and consultations; access to general information and library services; eligibility for participation in consultation processes and eligibility for access to official meetings such as ministerial meetings and Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings (CHOGMs).¹⁶ In principle then, the process for accreditation, and accreditation itself, differentiates between organizations only in so far as they are able to meet the criteria. That is to say, it only differentiates *ex post* between Commonwealth accredited organizations and other organizations.

Currently more than eighty organizations (one source puts that figure at 87)¹⁷ are accredited to the Commonwealth.¹⁸ While their description can and does differ from

¹³ Commonwealth Charter

¹⁴ Commonwealth organization as used within the report refers to organizations that have been accredited by the Commonwealth Secretariat. This is different from organizations that are registered within Commonwealth countries, or that work on issues that are relevant to the Commonwealth.

¹⁵ Guidelines for Accreditation to the Commonwealth

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 3-4

¹⁷ The Commonwealth Secretariat Partnership Strategy states that there are 76 civil society and professional organizations and nine associated organizations plus the Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth of Learning.

¹⁸ ‘Our Organizations’, www.thecommonwealth.org/our-organizations

source to source – even within the Commonwealth Secretariat, these generally include civil society organizations, professional organizations, and parliamentary and inter-governmental bodies. No other classification or grouping of accredited organizations is provided, but there seems to be an understanding that some Commonwealth organizations have different standing and reference is frequently made to associated organizations as different from accredited organizations.¹⁹ For instance, it has been pointed out that “the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning [...] are distinct from civil society accredited organizations.”²⁰

The combined membership and resources of the Commonwealth accredited organizations is substantial, and the scope of their activities and programs is likewise far-reaching. Accredited organizations now represent a significant component or facet of the Commonwealth and continue to play valuable roles in terms of addressing areas that are a priority for the Commonwealth. Moreover, their work of empowering popular movements and networks, and of improving the quality of their inclusion in areas of global significance, is more closely rooted in the Commonwealth of peoples. In addition, Commonwealth accredited organizations also work with and through complex and varied local, regional and international networks and in some cases these differ from the networks which the Commonwealth Secretariat leverages for and in its own work. And, the beneficiaries of accredited organizations programming may also differ from that of the Commonwealth Secretariat. These potentially give accredited organizations a voice and reach on matters which are important to the Commonwealth but extend beyond that of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), for instance, is an inter-governmental organization with 180 branches spread across twelve different regions of the world giving it a reach that extends well beyond that of the Commonwealth Secretariat. In similar vein the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the first network of its kind, has a constituency of more than 500 Commonwealth Universities in over 50 countries.²¹ Still, despite apparent intersections and some collaboration, the operational and strategic plans of the Secretariat are not more deeply aligned with those of either the CPA or the ACU. This is a shortcoming that is more widespread and consequently the Secretariat and accredited organizations often work at parallel to each other.

However, not all accredited organizations are on sound financial footing and individually some struggle. Accredited organizations were previously able to benefit from financing awarded annually by the Commonwealth Foundation but since 2012, with a change in the Foundation’s focus and priorities, that has ceased to be the case and funding is now contingent on alignment with the Foundation’s priorities. The Foundation’s shift also marked the end of its role as a coordinator for accredited

¹⁹ The Independent Forum for Commonwealth Organizations (IFCO) has suggested a list of criteria for differentiating associated organizations from other types of civil society organizations (CSOs) but this has not been adopted by the Secretariat.

²⁰ Canada’s Submission to the HLG for its Second Report, 30 November, 2018

²¹ Letter from the Association of Commonwealth Universities to the High Level Group, 20 November, 2018

organizations leaving them for all intents and purposes without any convening power.²² Several accredited organizations have also benefitted from having access to physical office and operational spaces at subsidized rates within the Commonwealth Hub located at Commonwealth House. However, the Commonwealth Secretariat's current plans for raising rental rates at Commonwealth House to reflect closer alignment with the going market rates in the area threatens the operational viability of many of these accredited organizations.

To summarize, against the backdrop of a constantly shifting international environment organizations accredited to the Commonwealth continue to be recognized as invaluable for extending the reach and scope of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Many commonwealth accredited organizations have strategic mandates and programmatic focus that are similar to, or complement, that of the Secretariat, and bring a wealth of organizational assets, capacities, connections (i.e. networks) and experiences that can be leveraged by the latter. Yet in seeking accreditation organizations are not required to demonstrate a 'commitment-to-purpose', and are expected only to advocate Commonwealth values and principles. Moreover, the current business model of the Commonwealth Secretariat has not lent to accredited organizations being engaged more effectively as partners in delivering on the strategic priorities. At the same time, the Secretariat has not served more effectively as a convening body for accredited organizations in areas of global significance. As a result, accredited organizations have functioned more as nominal partners with the Commonwealth Secretariat, and collaboration between the two remains transactional at best. In addition, there is a deep chasm between the two in terms of what the Secretariat reports it is doing for the benefit of accredited organizations and to involve them in the work of the Commonwealth; and what the latter have expressed is their real experience.

The above factors underscore why there is a pressing real need for the Commonwealth Secretariat to engage with accredited organizations more effectively, and as *partners*; and, also why the Secretariat needs to be more effective in serving as a convening power for accredited organizations. The Commonwealth ostensibly recognizes this as evinced by repeated statements to the effect that civil society organizations are "valuable assets that give the Commonwealth and depth and reach that is unique;"²³ and, perhaps more importantly, by the Commonwealth Charter's calls for accredited organizations to be viewed as "partners in promoting and supporting Commonwealth values and principles."²⁴ This is crucial, and accredited organizations are expected to demonstrate their Commonwealth DNA – that is, how they have contributed to achieving the promotion of Commonwealth value and principles. Yet, and at the same time, accredited organizations are not required to show a commitment to purpose (i.e. to delivering on Commonwealth priorities). This is a significant short-coming of the Guidelines and one that needs to be redressed, and perhaps the litmus test for inclusion as a Commonwealth accredited organizations should be based on the

²² From around the early 1980s the Commonwealth Foundation started playing a convening role for development oriented NGOs.

²³ Guidelines for Accreditation to the Commonwealth, Section A (1), page 1

²⁴ Commonwealth Charter, Art. 16

ability to demonstrate both requirements. In other words, achieving and sustaining accredited organization status should be based not only on ‘adherence to values’ but on also showing ‘commitment-to-purpose’ – the double trigger should be *sine qua non*.

2.2 Governance Arrangements

This section is further divided according to the governance arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat related to the accreditation of organizations; collaboration between the Commonwealth Secretariat and accredited organizations; and engagement with areas of global governance relevant to the Commonwealth.

2.2 (a) Arrangements for Accreditation

Accreditation to the Commonwealth²⁵ is governed by the criteria and provisions set out in the Guidelines for Accreditation to the Commonwealth approved by the Board of Governors. This is administered by an Accreditation Committee which is itself a sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, and whose roles and responsibilities; membership and stipulations for meetings, reporting and decision-making are set out in a separate Terms of Reference.²⁶ This sub-sections below discuss gaps or weaknesses identified in the Guidelines for Accreditation and puts forward the recommendations from the HLG for addressing these.

Definition and Terminology:

The current categorization of Commonwealth accredited organizations is, at best, confusing and is made more difficult by the inconsistent way in which the groupings of organizations are referred to by the Commonwealth Secretariat in its various documents. For instance, the Commonwealth Charter refers to “the network of the many intergovernmental, parliamentary, professional and civil society bodies”, while the Commonwealth Secretariat Partnerships Strategy refers to four, possibly five types of organizations specifically, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning; associated organizations and civil society **and** professional organizations.²⁷ These two examples suggest the position or view that for the Secretariat associated organizations differ from civil society bodies which in turn differ from other professional bodies or organizations. Yet, other definitions conventionally adopted by international organizations tend to subsume professional associations within civil society organizations as a broader category.²⁸

²⁵ The Terms of Reference for the Commonwealth Accreditation Committee states that the “set of criteria for [accreditation]” is for CSOs (civil society organizations). Presumably then, the Guidelines do not apply to the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning.

²⁶ See Terms of Reference for the Commonwealth Accreditation Committee

²⁷ Commonwealth Partnerships Strategy (2018), page 4. Bold is author’s emphasis.

²⁸ See UNGA Report of the Secretary-General in Response to the Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations – Civil Society Relations, (13 September, 2004), UN Doc A/59/354. For reference, the OECD has adopted the UN’s definition of civil society in its DAC Guidelines.

The Guidelines for Accreditation to the Commonwealth refers to only two main categories of organizations, specifically: inter-governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including civil society and associated organizations. No further criteria are provided for distinguishing between the different types of organizations – in other words, what makes an organization associated versus accredited? Do associated organizations require accreditation? The Guidelines are not clear on this, and other documents of the Commonwealth Secretariat do not help to clarify. The Independent Forum for Commonwealth Organizations provided one explanation – that is, that associated organizations have quasi-governmental political functions.²⁹

The matter of establishing definitional clarity concerning the different categories of accredited organizations is an important one and has significant implications for the way the Commonwealth Secretariat currently accredits and engages with Commonwealth organizations.³⁰ Given the Secretariat's repeated expressions of the importance and value of civil society and accredited organizations to its work in extending its values and in addressing the challenges of the wider Commonwealth itself, it is imperative that the matter of terminology be addressed, and with some urgency, for the following reasons:

- ⇒ It would provide the Secretariat with an opportunity to refresh the current cohort of accredited organizations – some organizations currently accredited may be graduated while attracting new organizations committed to delivering on Commonwealth strategic priorities;
- ⇒ It would enable the Secretariat to offer different packages of benefits to accredited organization by category; and
- ⇒ It would help the Secretariat to rationalize the way in which it engages accredited organizations under its Partnership Strategy.

Recommendations:

1. *The Accreditation Committee should finalize its work on adopting new categories of Commonwealth accredited organizations, in particular for associated organizations as different from other types of civil society organizations, and the Guidelines for Accreditation should subsequently be amended to reflect this.*

Criteria for Accreditation:

The current Guidelines for Accreditation to the Commonwealth has clear criteria for accreditation, including commitment to the Commonwealth's fundamental values and principles; representing the true diversity of Commonwealth countries; accountability and transparency; openness to permitting eligible individuals and an operational track record. As currently established, the criteria do not require organizations applying for accreditation to

²⁹ Email from IFCO to the HLG Independent Secretariat, 5 December, 2018

³⁰ Even here it is proving challenging to get the terminology right.

demonstrate commitment to addressing Commonwealth priorities. This is a weakness and should be redressed by adding this as one of the key requirements for eligibility for accreditation.

Accreditation is not automatic but the Guidelines could be strengthened by establishing a two-tiered approach for considering organizations for accreditation to the Commonwealth. For example, the current requirements for accountability & transparency (section 3.3); openness to membership (Section 3.4) and activity track record (3.5) – and to this may be added a fourth criterion financial and organizational sustainability either as a separate requirement or as a qualifier under 3.5. – should be minimum prerequisites (first prong) for any organization seeking accreditation. Once satisfied, organizations deemed eligible should then be evaluated based on a different set of measures (second prong). This should include, combined: commitment to Commonwealth values and principles (Section 3.1), representing Commonwealth diversity (3.2), AND (a new criterion) commitment to delivering on Commonwealth priorities.

Organizations not registered in Commonwealth countries are, technically, currently eligible for accreditation to the Commonwealth. The Guidelines specify only that organizations “must have a presence, membership and activities in at least three ... Commonwealth regions,”³¹ and “be open to permitting eligible individuals, organizations and associations from other Commonwealth member countries to join or associate with them.”³² Having a presence is not the same as being registered in, and it is possible to have a presence (i.e. through programs and services offerings) in Commonwealth countries without being registered in those countries. This gap should be remedied by establishing that only organizations with registered offices in Commonwealth countries are eligible for accreditation to the Commonwealth. The technicality may seem trivial, but redressing the disparity would go a long way towards ensuring that accredited organizations are inherently Commonwealth and are committed to the purpose of addressing its priorities.

Section 3.2.1 also speaks to the issue of regional accreditation. There is much merit to considering this approach for the Commonwealth. The Guidelines currently don't consider this point sufficiently other than to state that applications from “organizations working in only one region” may be considered. This should be augmented by providing further stipulations which ensure that ‘regional accreditation’ is in line with full accreditation. For instance, the two-pronged approach for accreditation should be retained but with some adjustments. For example, the stipulation for having activities between at least three Commonwealth regions could be adjusted to require that activity in just one Commonwealth region suffices but qualify that it should involve a minimum number of countries in that region (e.g. at least five). Organizations seeking

³¹ Guidelines for Accreditation to the Commonwealth, §3.2.1

³² Ibid, §3.4.1

regional accreditation should also be required to show evidence of funding for undertaking desired activities and projects.

The Guidelines further require organizations that are accredited to make the decisions of their governing bodies visible to all members through furnishing regular and reliable reports (Section 3.3). While this is good, visibility does not equate to transparency and it is possible for organizations to lack transparency in their decision-making processes but still make their decisions visible. The difference between the two is a crucial one and the Accreditation Committee should give consideration to the intended objective here – is the aim transparency in decision-making processes of organizations seeking accredited?

Finally, the Guidelines require that organizations applying for accreditation be in existence for no less than two years and demonstrate a track record of activity during that period. This requirement as established does not stipulate that such track record of activity should align strongly with the Commonwealth Secretariat's priority areas, or is focused on addressing a development need of Commonwealth countries, or addresses Commonwealth priorities. Clarifying this could help to strengthen the criterion by shifting the burden of evidence from simply demonstrating organizational activity for a minimum period of two years (this seems the bare minimum) to instead showing that organizations seeking accreditation are working on areas relevant to and aligned with the strategic thrust of the Secretariat. It may also help to add a requirement for organizations to also show that they have achieved sustainability, or are on a track towards doing so. Doing so would tie in the accreditation criterion for activity track record (section 3.5.1) with the provision governing suspension and exit for reasons of financial unsustainability (section F.9 of the Guidelines).

Recommendations:

1. *The Board of Governors should establish a new framework for accreditation of Commonwealth organizations. This should ideally:*
 - (a) *reserve full accredited organization status for entities that are pan-Commonwealth in focus, have values and principles aligned with the Commonwealth's as expressed in the Commonwealth Charter, **and** demonstrate commitment to assisting the Commonwealth Secretariat delivery on the priorities of the Commonwealth;*
 - (b) *strengthen the process for accreditation by*
 - (i) *establishing a two-tiered approach for considering applications from interested organizations: a first tiered setting out pre-requisites which organizations must meet in order to be eligible for their applications for accreditation to be advanced; and, a second tier setting out the criteria on which eligible organizations will be evaluated; and*

- (c) *strengthen the criteria for accreditation to the Commonwealth by*
- (i) *adding a requirement for organizations to show that they are registered in a Commonwealth country;*
 - (ii) *adding a further requirement for organizations to show that they have achieved a degree of sustainability;³³*
 - (iii) *requiring that accredited organizations demonstrate transparency in their decision-making processes (Section 3.3.1); and*
 - (iv) *clarifying that the track record of organizational activity (Section 3.5.1) must reflect strong alignment with Commonwealth strategic priorities and areas of engagement.*
2. *The Guidelines for Accreditation should be amended to provide for a separate section on Regional Accreditation. The criteria for regional accreditation should ideally be consistent with the criteria for full accreditation but take into consideration the fact that organizations will have a less than pan-Commonwealth focus.*

Benefits of Accreditation (Section C):

The Guidelines currently set out a schedule of benefits for accredited organizations. These are not automatic but rather ‘may be available’ to organizations. This suggests a rather large degree of subjectivity in how benefits are assigned as evidenced by the condition that invitations to consultation processes are required of accredited organizations (Section 4.3.1), as well by the fact that accredited organizations “may [only] be eligible” to attend official meetings (Section 4.4.1). To compound this, the Guidelines does not set out criteria for when organizations would be deemed ‘eligible’ for gaining access to official meetings of the Commonwealth, and to participate in consultation processes.

The accredited organizations have complained bitterly about the lack of access to official meetings, and also about the inconsistent ways in which these ‘benefits’ have been assigned in the past, and some argue that they are in fact not benefits but ‘carrots’. According to the Secretariat however, accredited organizations are invited to all Ministerial meetings either as participants or as observers, where logistically feasible;³⁴ and it points out that accredited organizations are also key partners in the organization and delivery of parallel or side event at Ministerial meetings. For instance, the Secretariat states that “many accredited organizations were closely involved in the planning, organization and delivery of the Women’s, Youth, People’s and Business Forums at CHOGM 2018.” Whatever the case, there is a significant disconnect between the Secretariat and

³³ This can be through measures such as showing that at least 20% of their total annual budgets are financed from their own sources, as an example.

³⁴ The Secretariat reports that representatives from more than 65 accredited organizations attended CHOGM 2018, and many attended the Foreign Minister’s Roundtable with Civil Society on the 20th April.

accredited organizations on this point and the almost overwhelming view of the latter is that they are consistently excluded from these events.

Recommendations:

1. *The Accreditation Committee should complete its work on establishing different categories of accredited organizations at the earliest. This could conceivably include, as an example, a Tier 1 which are organizations with a pan-Commonwealth focus and meet the other criteria established for accreditation; a Tier 2 which are regionally accredited organizations; and a Tier 3 which are organizations without accreditation but which may be granted observer status for specific Commonwealth events and meetings.*
2. *The benefits of accreditation should be differentiated by category. For instance,*

Tier 1 organizations – may be granted the schedule of benefits as currently established in the Guidelines (i.e. access to Marlborough House upon request; eligibility to attend official meetings of the Commonwealth on invitation; etc.) but with two important qualifications, specifically: formal discussions and consultations with the Secretariat required periodically (sub-section 4.1.2); and use of Commonwealth symbol (4.1.4) limited to co-branding and visibility purposes only and for pre-approved events, subject to specific terms and conditions.

Tier 2 organizations – limited access to Marlborough House subject to availability and at partial meetings/events costs; access to Commonwealth regional events and official meetings on invitation only basis;

Tier 3 organization - limited access to Marlborough House for specific purposes (hosting meetings) subject to availability and at full meeting costs to organization; access to Commonwealth events and official meetings as observers on invitation only basis.

Suspension and Exit (Section F):

The Guidelines currently stipulate criteria for suspension of accreditation, that is, in instances where organizations are “in breach of the provisions of Chapters B and D, ... or of the fundamental values and principles of the Commonwealth.” This section also tacitly introduces a requirement for sustainability that is not present in either Chapters B or D. If sustainability will be one of the measures by which the status of accredited organizations is evaluated, then this should be established as part of the criteria for gaining initial accreditation, and also for getting re-accredited.

Recommendations:

1. *The Guidelines for Accreditation should be amended to establish systematic five-yearly periodic accreditation reviews,³⁵ and link this to the current mechanisms for suspension and exit while also strengthening those provisions.*
2. *The Board of Governors should*
 - (i) *strengthen the accreditation process by introducing, under section F for Suspension and exit, mechanisms for graduating accredited organizations that no longer fully meet the criteria set out under Section B of the Guidelines.*
 - (ii) *amend Section F of the Guidelines to read: Graduation, Suspension and Exit.*
 - (iii) *clarify the process for dealing with organizations that become unsustainable due to financial or other grounds (Section F.9). For instance, accredited organizations could provisionally have their accredited status suspended for an initial period of two years but would be eligible for reinstatement by the end of this period subject to their demonstrating that they organization has been placed back on sustainable footing.*

2.2 (b) Arrangements for Collaboration and Partnerships

The Commonwealth has long recognized that there is a need for strengthening collaboration between Commonwealth organizations and the Commonwealth Secretariat. This has ostensibly been a priority for the latter, and the issue was first addressed by the High Level Review Group which reported to Commonwealth Heads at Durban in 1999, and also at Coolum in 2002. While the Coolum meeting paid special attention to the relationship between the different facets of the Commonwealth,³⁶ the Durban meeting set out key priorities for consideration concerning civil society including strengthening the links with them, and establishing sound criteria for accrediting non-governmental organizations.³⁷ The value of civil society to the Commonwealth and the perpetuation of its values is enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter. This sense of the valuable role that accredited organizations play within, *inter alia*, the Commonwealth is reflected within the Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic

³⁵ Five-yearly periodic accreditation reviews would place a requirement on accredited organizations that they continue to strongly conform to B and D, and that their own organizational values and principles continue to align strongly with those of the Commonwealth.

³⁶ Amanda Shah, *Joining Up the Commonwealth: A response to governmental calls for increased co-ordination with civil society*, Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, August 2002, page 1

³⁷ *Ibid.* page 4

Plan, the Partnership Strategy, and various CHOGM Communiqués including those of 2015³⁸ and 2018³⁹.

The Charter also notes the importance of the special relationship between the accredited organizations and the Secretariat, and this is viewed as fundamental to the character of the Commonwealth. This has been reaffirmed by the current Secretary-General on multiple occasions, including most recently in a speech delivered at Westminster Abbey on 16 October, 2018 whereby it was stated that the manner in which networks for coordination flourish within the Commonwealth is one of its greatest strengths. In noting this the Secretary-General cited the “influence and significant contribution made by Commonwealth organizations.” Yet, and despite the many official declarations by the Secretariat and its various governing bodies in different strategic documents and official forums and meetings, there seems to be a deep chasm between the Secretariat and accredited organizations in terms of what the former says it is doing to involve and benefit the latter; and, what the latter relate is their real experience in working with the Secretariat.

The Commonwealth Secretariat’s Programs & Initiatives

The Commonwealth Secretariat reports that it has collaborated with accredited organizations on a number of initiatives across a wide range of areas, from Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings to the Foreign Ministers Roundtable with Civil Society to the Commonwealth Youth Challenge Event and more. The Secretariat also reports that it has sought collaboration and engagement with the accredited organizations in delivering on its strategic priorities and has taken concrete steps towards providing them with tools and mechanisms to facilitate this happening. To substantiate these claims, the Secretariat provided information on three recent sets of initiatives. First, the Secretary-General has implemented a series of structured and periodic dialogues with accredited organizations in an effort to strengthen partnerships, and by the end of 2018 would have held at least three meetings with them.⁴⁰ These dialogues have served as forums for information sharing by the Secretariat while providing the accredited organizations with opportunities for raising their concerns directly with the Secretary-General. At the dialogue in July 2018, which had the participation of more than fifty-five persons from over fifty accredited organizations, the Secretary-General stated that the forum “was an opportunity to inform about the work of the Secretariat, as well as for a productive exchange on how [both sides] can work together and improve the relationship.”⁴¹ This followed from similar comments by the Secretary General made at the previous

³⁸ CHOGM Communiqué 2015, Section 44

³⁹ CHOGM Communiqué 2018, Section 52

⁴⁰ At least three meetings between the SG and AOs have been held including on 6th October, 2017; 31st July, 2018 and 7th December, 2018.

⁴¹ Meeting Summary – Agenda Item 1, Secretary-General’s Dialogue with Accredited Organizations, held at Marlborough House on Tuesday 31, July 2018.

meeting in October 2017 wherein she noted “the desperate need for coordinated responses and remedial action.”⁴²

Secondly, in order to fulfill the promise of partnerships, and to ensure strategic coherence with other aspects of the Secretariat’s mandate, a dedicated Innovation and Partnerships team was established in 2017 within the Strategy, Portfolio and Partnerships Division in the office of the Secretary General’s. This team reports to the Assistant Secretary-General who has been designated by the Secretary-General as the senior most contact point at the Secretariat for accredited organizations. The Secretariat reports that “this team has been engaging and communicating regularly with the accredited organizations, including by convening meetings to identify partnership opportunities and joint programming or capacity building initiatives.” As confirmation of this the Secretariat points to the regular use of the accredited organizations workspace on the Huddle platform for sharing updates, event invitations, and other relevant documentation including a Commonwealth Calendar of Events.

Finally, in July of this year, the Board of Governors approved a Partnerships Strategy for implementation. This Strategy makes the point that “the Commonwealth is a global network and more than the sum of any of its constituent parts”, and argues not only that partnerships are critical for advancing the Commonwealth’s goals and ideals and that the Secretariat plays a critical role in fostering and coordinating such partnerships within the Commonwealth network and beyond. The Partnerships Strategy clearly identifies accredited organizations as the second of five facets for collaboration, and established the need for developing strategic, programmatic and project partnerships as the main objectives them. The Strategy further outlines the ways in which this objective will be achieved including, inter alia, *working more closely and in consultation with the family of organizations; helping the accredited organizations develop skills and capacities and mapping these against the Secretariat’s own Strategic Plan; and supporting their visibility through the Commonwealth Innovation Hub.*

Comments from Accredited Organizations

During their consultations with the High Level Group accredited organizations individually and collectively expressed that, contrary to what is reported by the Secretariat as discussed above, they continue to suffer significant challenges in communicating and working with the Secretariat. Many organizations expressed deep frustrations about feeling continually locked out of key decision-making processes and in engaging on Commonwealth priorities; and, also about not having ready access to data and information with some

⁴² Secretary General’s Remarks, Secretary Generals Dialogue with Commonwealth Accredited Organizations, 6 October, 2017. The quote is from a statement made by the SG in reference to the need to respond to Commonwealth countries that suffered from natural disasters but reflects the tenor of the relationship between the Secretariat and accredited organizations.

finding the ComSec’s communications platform (Huddle) difficult to navigate.⁴³ As one organization noted, “we do not know who within the Commonwealth Secretariat is working on these issues so cannot align our activities with theirs ... we cannot suggest individuals they should invite to their meetings to speak to various issues – it’s a lost opportunity”; Another stated simply that “many times it is evident that the Secretariat prefers to operate on a stand-alone basis [...] there is no sharing of information and no meaningful consultation on key initiatives, in particular on the strategic planning process.” Yet another opined, “we are not asking the Secretariat for any funding, we don’t need funding as we are well resourced and represent a significant and growing constituency that is vital to the wider Commonwealth, yet the Secretariat just refuses to engage us as partners.” Such sentiments echo the widespread outlook shared by many, if not all, Commonwealth accredited organizations.

More constructively, accredited organizations articulated a number of concerns. One, they, almost overwhelmingly, had a shared sense and expectation that the Secretariat needs to do more “to serve as a platform from which accredited organizations can grow.” Several organizations pointed to a failure on the part of the Secretariat to consistently leverage the work they were doing in areas of global significance as a way of strengthening the value being added by the Commonwealth to those areas. Organizations also expressed grave concerns over the imminent situation with Commonwealth House and the likelihood that they will be required to pay rents at commercial rates for being housed there in the future. Two, many accredited organizations also expressed a strong desire for being involved more meaningfully in the initiatives of the Commonwealth. On multiple occasions organizations stated that they are excluded from key decision-making processes despite the fact that their focus, programs and services strongly complement those on offer by the Secretariat. Three, accredited organizations expressed real concerns over the lack of meaningful inclusion on delivering on the priorities of the Commonwealth. They are particularly frustrated by what, to them, seems like a lack of access to the Secretariat and key contact persons or points within the organization; and, also from exclusion from consultative processes with any of the Secretariat’s senior staff and governing bodies.⁴⁴ And four, accredited organizations also stated that the way the Secretariat engages with them has changed, and for the worse. Several organizations noted that they are no longer able to relate to a specific contact point within the Secretariat on matters of concern or just to simply get information about initiatives, programs and services. These organizations also felt that the Huddle platform was not ‘user friendly’.

Analysis of the Problems

The disparities between the accounts by accredited organizations and those of the Secretariat suggest several failures or short-comings in the

⁴³ Nicholas Watts, IFCO Information Requests to Commonwealth Secretariat, 2 June, 2018

⁴⁴ Accredited Organizations responses and written submissions to the High Level Group; also IFCO Information Requests to the Commonwealth Secretariat 2015

relationship between the two of them, and on different levels. Firstly, there is a deep chasm between the two sides and the divide between them seems to have grown wider in recent times. While the Partnerships Strategy should address this, it is still relatively new and will need time for the Secretariat to implement this properly. Meanwhile, the Innovation Hub for all its rather impressive features, is falling short in this regard. This may be because it is a tool for facilitating these things but cannot substitute for relationships building.

Secondly, the disparities point to a failure by the Secretariat to recognize the emergence of civil society organizations as a significant element of the wider Commonwealth. By various measures the individual and combined reach and scope of accredited organizations across the Commonwealth is substantial. Commonwealth organizations now represent a significant component of and play a valuable role within the Commonwealth, and their work of empowering popular movements and networks and improving the quality of their inclusion is more closely rooted in the Commonwealth of peoples.

Thirdly, the disparities underscore the failure of the Secretariat to leverage the organizational influence and capacities of accredited organizations to better address global areas of concern to the Commonwealth. The description provided by one accredited organization helps to illustrate the shortcoming: “We work on matters complementary to that of the Secretariat, yet the Secretariat engages without any sharing of information or coordination on strategic elements with us. Therefore, when we engage, usually after the Secretariat has completed its work, we are often faced with having to plug gaps ... this could have been avoided had we worked together... the lost opportunities translate into lessened impact.”

And finally, the discrepancies highlight on one hand, the Secretariat’s failure to provide more effective forums and mechanism for structured dialogues with the accredited organizations; and on the other hand, a reluctance by accredited organizations to embrace the Secretariat’s increasing use of digitally enabled approaches for communication and working. With regards to the former, accredited organizations need to have systematic access to dialogues with the Secretariat’s senior management (in particular division managers), and also opportunities to share information on their activities, achievements and impact with the BoG similar to those held with the SG. Such dialogues should be based on alignment of strategic priorities and work plans and be structured so as to allow accredited organizations to engage directly on matters of significance to them. In other words, the agendas for these dialogues cannot be only about what the Secretariat is doing and needs done. And as regards the latter, the Secretariat cannot be required to return to the old way of conducting business mainly on personal contact. The Secretariat now has an entire team for dealing with partnerships, and uses the Innovation Hub for facilitating this and accredited organizations must adjust to this new reality. However, this needs to be complemented by relationship building as the Hub is currently falling short in serving as “the space for inter-action and networking between the Secretariat and

accredited organizations” despite being “designed ... to be a peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, learning, networking and exploration platform.”

Together, the above emphasize a failure on the part of both accredited organizations and the Commonwealth Secretariat to forge collaborative partnerships, in particular in areas of concern to the Commonwealth. Such relationships have instead remained mostly transactional and, to the extent that the former is requested *ex post* to “indicate possible areas of collaboration which are in the latter’s Delivery Plan,” also asymmetric. This is not tenable. The two sides need to work towards achieving collaborative relationships. Accredited organizations are waking up to this realization and the recognition that it is incumbent on them to build their capacities; to refresh their mandates; and to be ready to serve effectively as development partners within and across the Commonwealth. As one organization noted: “it is important to know what the Commonwealth Secretariat wants from accredited organizations.”

In reconciling the conflicting positions and evident chasm between the Commonwealth Secretariat and accredited organizations, the High Level Group found on one hand, what seems to be, several levels of mechanisms currently in place for consultations and/or dialogue between the Secretariat and its governing bodies and accredited organizations – between the Secretary-General and accredited organizations (the SG-AOs periodic dialogues); between the key liaison for the Secretariat and accredited organizations;⁴⁵ and between the Committee of the Whole (CoW) and accredited organizations.⁴⁶ Accredited organizations have also had opportunities to meet with the Accreditation Committee;⁴⁷ and for consulting with Foreign Ministers at the Foreign Ministers Roundtables with Civil Society.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the HLG found that although accredited organizations are invited *ex post* to make proposals to the Secretariat outlining how their work aligned with the Secretariat’s Strategic Plan, it is evident that the relationship is asymmetrical and transactional in nature.

These findings suggest the constraints accredited organizations experience with engaging more effectively with the Secretariat and at deeper strategic and programmatic levels are not because of a lack of structures or platforms for engagement; rather, the problems may have more to do with organizational attitudes, personal egos, and personality conflicts. Taking this into consideration, the HLG propose that:

Recommendations:

⁴⁵ The Secretary-General has appointed the Assistant Secretary-General to serve as the senior-most contact point at the Secretariat for AOs, and he is supported by a dedicated Innovation and Partnerships team operating within the Strategy, Portfolio and Partnerships Division

⁴⁶ Committee of the Whole Meeting with Commonwealth Accredited Organizations, 20 October, 2015

⁴⁷ October 2017

⁴⁸ Representatives from more than 65 accredited organizations attended the session on the 20 April, 2018

1. *The Commonwealth Secretariat's Partnerships Strategy should continue to serve as the framework for guiding the Secretariat's engagement with accredited organizations;*
2. *The Commonwealth Secretariat should*
 - (i) *expand the current dialogue with accredited organizations to include regular access to other senior Secretariat staff as well as the Board of Governors, and ensure that these discuss matters that are important to accredited organizations. For instance, dialogue with the BoG should address challenges under the Partnership Strategy; policy considerations in areas of Commonwealth priority; etc.*
 - (ii) *adopt consultative approaches with the accredited organizations earlier in their (the Secretariat's) strategic planning processes. To the extent possible, the relationships should attempt to move beyond simply aligning work streams (i.e. transactional partnerships) and instead seek to establish real synergies with accredited organizations for the purpose of jointly addressing global areas of concern to the Commonwealth (i.e. collaborative partnerships). The two are linked but engender substantively different approaches.*
 - (iii) *Serve as a convening power for accredited organizations while building their capacity and enhancing their visibility and access to information and knowledge. To that end the Secretariat should continue to work closely with accredited organizations on navigating the (virtual) Innovation Hub, and also continue to provide training and technical support on using this for enhancing their own visibility.*
 - (iv) *ensure that Marlborough House is available to accommodate the Commonwealth Hub for accredited organizations – i.e. that they have the physical space to operate from there, and that the site and its outbuildings are reconfigured into an accessible and welcoming central zone of Commonwealth unity.*

2.2 (c) Arrangements for Engaging Areas of Global Significance

The Commonwealth Secretariat is a unique organization with a unique standing in global affairs. As one member noted, “it has an important role today in reinforcing a rules based order that reflects our shared interests and values.” The Commonwealth’s engagement in areas of global significance are currently guided by the various priorities set out in its Charter, as well as those identified by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their bi-annual meetings (as articulated in their Communiqués), and operationalized in the Secretariat’s strategic and operational plans. The combined number of ‘priorities’ arising from these various sources are numerous, expansive, and ultimately provide too broad

a framework for the Commonwealth Secretariat to engage adequately or effectively.

Meanwhile, the Secretariat is faced with declining financial resources from its core funding sources (members' assessed contributions and voluntary contributions to the CFTC) even as the use of Extra-Budgetary Resources (EBRs) as a vehicle for funding myriad special priority projects is increasing. This is deeply symptomatic of an increasing competition between and among Commonwealth members over preferences for "quite different and varied causes to be taken up." Not surprisingly, the Secretariat is faced with growing tensions with its governing bodies over the allocation and governance of resources, and one manifestation of this is a Commonwealth Secretariat trying to be everything to everyone, and on almost every issue. This way of doing things is unsustainable and has led to some members expressing deep concerns over the Commonwealth's focus being too diluted.

The immediate and long term challenge for the Secretariat then is twofold: on one hand, it has to identify an appropriate framework for guiding engagement of the Commonwealth in areas of global concern to its members and in where some facets of the wider Commonwealth family (e.g. Commonwealth organizations) are already occupied. Several stakeholders have suggested that the UN's Global Goals or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present an, perhaps the most, appropriate framework for steering Commonwealth engagement, and is one within which it can add-value and bring a 'Commonwealth voice'. On the other hand, the Secretariat needs to more effectively assist Commonwealth Heads of Government (at CHOGM) with prioritizing a limited number of key global issues of concern to Commonwealth countries (both current and emerging), while strengthening its ability to add value and influence developments in such areas.⁴⁹

Put differently, the aim is, or should be, for the Commonwealth Secretariat to re-establish itself as being the voice of the Commonwealth and to be able "to speak with one voice on particular issues" yet capture the diversity of its membership and stakeholders on those issues. The Commonwealth's engagement in the Paris climate negotiations is both a testament of what can be achieved and a reflection of the type of concerted action that is possible. Thereby the Commonwealth brought the "diverse national circumstances and common purpose [of] one third of the world's population spread across all continents and oceans" to bear on the outcomes of the negotiations, and committed to the "support[ing] vulnerable states and communities in building their capacity for resilience and adaptation to the adverse impacts of climate change" at the same time at the more developed countries committed to mobilizing the funding needed by these countries to address the challenges.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ This point of influencing developments was identified by Australia. See Submission by Australia on the Second Report of the High Level Group on Governance of the Commonwealth Secretariat, November 2018

⁵⁰ Commonwealth Leaders Statement on Climate Action, 28 November, 2015, available at URL: <http://thecommonwealth.org/media/press-release/commonwealth-leaders-statement-climate-action>

To the achieve the above, the HLG proposes the following:

Recommendations:

1. *The Commonwealth Secretariat should implement the Commonwealth Curriculum Framework for Enabling the SDGs,⁵¹ and also develop a more comprehensive 'Commonwealth Framework for Facilitating the SDGs'.*
2. *The Commonwealth Secretariat should assist Commonwealth Heads of Government with prioritizing a limited number of issues (current and emerging) that are of key concern to the Commonwealth and which require their decision-making. To facilitate this the Commonwealth Secretariat should*
 - (i) *continuously identify emerging areas relevant to its mandate that are consistent with its comparative advantages, and which places Commonwealth concerns and approaches at the heart of the relevant agendas; and*
 - (ii) *explore partnerships which allow for adjacent global issue-areas of concern to Commonwealth members and stakeholders to be addressed jointly by its development partners.*

⁵¹ This was developed in partnership with Commonwealth organizations in response to recommendations from the 19th Council of Commonwealth Education Ministers and provides an apt framework for implementation of the SDGs.

Appendix 1 - List of Commonwealth Organizations Consulted

1. Commonwealth Association of Legislative Counsel
2. The Association of Commonwealth Universities
3. Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
4. Commonwealth Countries League (CCL)
5. Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA)
6. Commonwealth Association of Tax Administrators
7. Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council
8. Commonwealth Jewish Council
9. Commonwealth Consortium for Education
10. Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC)
11. Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF)
12. TUC
13. Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies
14. Association of Commonwealth Universities
15. Association of Commonwealth Universities
16. Commonwealth Association of Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators Commonwealth
17. Commonwealth Association of Surveying and Land Economy
18. Conference of Commonwealth Postal Administrators
19. Commonwealth Human Ecology Council
20. CommonAge
21. Commonwealth Association of Museums
22. Commonwealth Association of Planners
23. Commonwealth Boxing Council
24. Commonwealth Businesswomen's Network Commonwealth Education Trust
25. The Commonwealth Equality Network Commonwealth Fashion Council
26. Commonwealth Jewish Council
27. Commonwealth Trade Union Group
28. Commonwealth Association for Health and Disability
29. Commission on Science and Technology for Sustainable Development in the South
30. Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work
31. International Federation for Human Rights
32. Royal Overseas League
33. Institute of Commonwealth Studies
34. Royal Commonwealth Society
35. Muslim Aid
36. Ramphal Institute
37. Rotary International – Representative to the Commonwealth

Appendix 2 – Selected List of Reference Documents Consulted

Biennial Report of the Commonwealth Secretary-General 2018

Committee of the Whole Meeting with Accredited Commonwealth Organizations,
Submission by Commonwealth Civil Society Organizations, 20 March, 2018

Commonwealth Charter

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting Communique – “Towards a Common
Future”, April, 2018

Commonwealth Secretariat Partnership Strategy, July 2018

Commonwealth Secretariat, *Terms of Reference for the Commonwealth Accreditation
Committee*

Guidelines for Accreditation to the Commonwealth

Informal Forum of Commonwealth Organizations (Cos) and the Commonwealth High
Level Review, Submission to HE Anote Tong, 30 June 2018

Shah, Amanda (2002), *Joining up the Commonwealth: A response to governmental
calls for increased co-ordination with civil society*, Commonwealth Policy Studies
Unit

Watts, Nicholas, *Partnerships: Using Partnerships and Collaboration to Unlock the
Commonwealth’s Potential*

Watts, Nicholas (2018), “Commonwealth Organizations: Third Pillar of the
Commonwealth?” *The Round Table*, 107:1, 97-99, DOI:
10.1080/00358533.2018.1425113

Watts, Nicholas, Letter to Secretary-General re: Health and Education, 16 January, 2017

Preliminary Mapping of Commonwealth Organizations by Sector, with a focus on Health
and Education, www.ifco.online

Secretary General’s Dialogue with Accredited Organizations, Meeting Summary, 31 July,
2018