



Commonwealth Foundation Strategy 2017-2021 Review

Final Report



26 January 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Review of the Commonwealth Foundation Strategy 2017-2021 has been a highly collaborative process. We would like to convey our appreciation to all participants for their time, energy and commitment to the Review process. This includes notably Foundation staff who have given so generously of their time in what has been an open and honest process of shared reflection. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of the many and varied stakeholders willing to be interviewed for the Review. Interviewees included the present and past Chair of the Board of Governors, the Executive Committee and Grants Committee, Civil Society Governors, the previous Directorate, senior Commonwealth Secretariat officials, representatives of other Commonwealth Organisations, and current and previous programme partners.

We are particularly grateful to the members of the Foundation's internal Steering Committee, established specifically to guide the Review process and liaise with all participants. A huge thank you also to the current Director General and Deputy Director General for helping the team with the scope and content of the Review, while pushing us at all times to focus on higher-level strategic reflections. Last, but by no means least, we are extremely grateful to Olivia Bourge for coordinating a multitude of events, interviews and online meetings with unflagging patience and good humour.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

12WAMM	12th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting
CHOGM	Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
CI	Collaborative Impact
ComSec	Commonwealth Secretariat
CPF	Commonwealth People's Forum
CSAG	ExCo Civil Society Advisory Group
EBR	Extra-Budgetary Resources
ExCo	Executive Committee (of the Foundation's Board of Governors)
FACRP	Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Project
KLC	Knowledge, Learning and Communications
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MTR	Mid-Term Review
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PGG	Participatory Governance and Gender
ToC	Theory of Change

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1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The Commonwealth Foundation commissioned Collaborative Impact (CI) to undertake a Review of its Strategy 2017-2021 and to facilitate the design and drafting process for the next strategy.¹ This report summarises the findings of the Strategy 2017-21 Review, undertaken by CI between August and December 2020.

Given the rigorous evaluative evidence generated by the 2019 Mid-term Review (MTR), this Review focussed on creating shared forward-looking insights regarding the Foundation's value, niche and potential.² The Review was specifically directed towards securing the information and insights needed for the Foundation to build a strong strategic plan for its future. To this end, CI was tasked with assessing the approaches, structure and functioning of the Foundation with reference to its identity, operating environment and other relevant factors well beyond the current strategic plan. Moreover, the Review was expected to conduct these inquiries together with the Foundation staff and stakeholders through a collaborative process that would help to build up collective insights and ownership of the new strategy.

The Review objectives therefore were to:

- capture and triangulate the perceptions and reflections of staff and stakeholders on the progress made during the present strategy period (2017-21); and
- highlight good and effective practice - backed by illustrative evidence - signalling potential ways forward into the next strategy period (2021-26).

The structure of the report is as follows. Section two describes the Review approach and process. Section three details the main findings of the Review. Section four maps out a set of recommendations emerging from the Review that will feed into the Strategy 2021-26 design process.

2 REVIEW APPROACH AND PROCESS

To achieve the objectives set for the Review, CI adopted a highly interactive approach in which strategy evaluation and strategy design are more iterative and integrated, rather than being a conventionally linear two-step process, combining elements of **Design Thinking**³ and of CI's **Participatory Impact Assessment and Learning Approach (PIALA)**⁴. In accordance with this approach, Foundation staff

¹ It was initially expected that the next strategy would also be a four year one (2021-2025). At its December 2020 meeting the Executive Committee of the Commonwealth Foundation's Board of Governors considered and endorsed a proposal for a five-year plan with a 'stop and reflect' step at the end of Years 2 and 4. In addition to more closely matching the term of the current Directorate, this change was seen to meet the requirements of both flexibility and predictability that will be required of the Foundation as it moves into the future.

² Unlike a conventional evaluation that generates evidence to test for strength of contribution and to measure achievements against pre-set criteria.

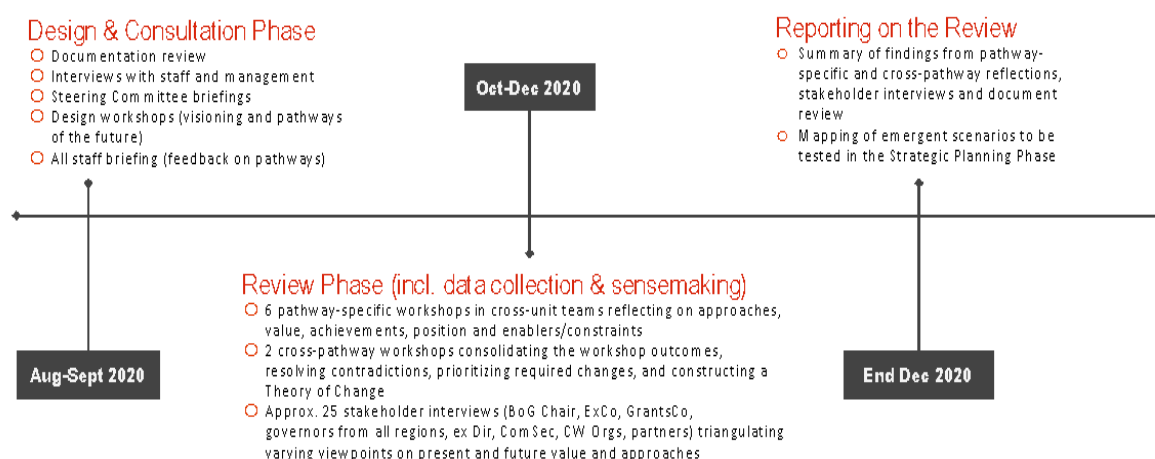
³ Cf. <https://collabimpact.org/4-d-model>

⁴ Cf. <https://collabimpact.org/piala>

and stakeholders were encouraged to identify exemplary cases or practices that supported the Foundation's forward-looking contribution claims with solid evidence. The inquiries were guided by three sets of questions.

- **Evaluative questions:**
What has the Foundation achieved? What approaches worked well and can be enhanced in the next strategy period? What were the critical enabling conditions and relationships that will need to be maintained and strengthened to make them work well? What are the key lessons learned for the next strategy period?
- **Deepening analytical questions:**
Is there a clear vision and a shared and valid Theory of Change? Does the Foundation have the right structure and capacities to deliver on its mandate and Theory of Change?
- **Forward-looking questions:**
Given the Foundation's small size and budget, what should it focus on, moving forward? How could it best harness its intergovernmental nature and its specific mandate as being the Commonwealth's organisation for civil society? What is the type and level of impact it can generate?

Figure 1 - The Review Process



The Review process consisted of **two major phases (see Figure 1)**, which are feeding directly into the final phase of strategy drafting:

- In the **first phase of design and consultations (Aug - Sept 2020)**, the Foundation established an internal Steering Committee to support and guide CI and engage in the design workshops that started with visioning and imagining the Foundation's future work and change pathways. Interviews were held with staff of the Foundation, and relevant documents including governance materials, activity reports and publications were carefully reviewed. A full list of documents reviewed is attached as **Annex 1**.
- In the **second phase of data collection and sense-making (Oct-Dec 2020)**, the CI team organised and facilitated a series of internal reflection workshops with Foundation staff and

conducted approximately 25 stakeholder interviews, alongside the gathering of additional case material.

During the first phase design workshops, three interlinked impact pathways were identified that contribute to the Foundation's overall value. Specific reflection questions aimed at ascertaining value were then formulated under each of them:

- **Programmatic pathway value** - How does the Foundation's programmatic approach of grant making, cultural expression, capacity building and exchange platforms bring about the visibility and changes needed to create this value for the Commonwealth?
- **Strategic pathway value** - In what ways does the Foundation's unique position as a trusted and acknowledged intergovernmental agency advancing citizens' voices and interests add value to the Commonwealth brand and Commonwealth family? How does the Foundation's strategic approach of 'collaborative diplomacy' with member states bring about the changes needed to create this value?
- **Organisational pathway value** - In what ways does the Foundation's unique position as an advocate for and embodiment of the Commonwealth Charter add value to the Commonwealth? How does the Foundation's organisational approach of 'walking the talk' in its organisational policies and practices contribute to the changes needed to create this value?

Throughout October and into early November 2020, CI facilitated a series of internal reflections with Foundation staff to reflect on achievements during the current Strategic Plan period and to set out a vision for the Foundation going forward around these three pathways. Working in these three pathway-specific teams, colleagues from across the different units and programmes as well as the Directorate reflected on the Foundation's unique position, approaches and value. Reflections drew on past or ongoing cases of good and innovative practice. CI then used the information and insights gained from these workshops and its ongoing document review to develop a tailored approach to its external stakeholder interviews.

During November and December 2020, CI interviewed a range of individuals and groups with direct knowledge of the Foundation and a stake in its future. Each interview was carefully prepared, with questions tailored to the specific expertise and exposure of the interviewee/s. Through these stakeholder interviews, CI collected and triangulated varying views of - and reflections on - the Foundation's present and future value and ways of working. Interviewees included the present and past Chair of the Board of Governors, the Executive Committee and Grants Committee; other governors from across all Commonwealth regions, Civil Society Governors (CSAG); the previous Directorate; senior Commonwealth Secretariat officials, representatives of other Commonwealth Organisations, and current and previous programme partners. A full list of interviewees is attached as **Annex 2**.

3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this section we detail the key findings, with boxed evidence, around the Foundation's vision and identity/mandate and the linked challenges/opportunities that have emerged during the 2017-21 strategy period. These findings are based on a synthesis of the internal staff reflections and external stakeholder interviews described above.

3.1 Vision and Identity/Mandate

The Foundation's vision should be anchored firmly to the Commonwealth: a vision of a Commonwealth that is truly of and for its people.

Through reflections during the Review, Foundation staff identified the Foundation's vision as being synonymous with that of the Commonwealth as a whole, a system of people and an institution that is dedicated to serving its people. The Review elicited the following key findings linked to this vision:

- The concepts of "people" and "civil society" championed by the Foundation include a purposeful focus on **lesser-heard voices/narratives**.
- What makes the Foundation unique in the Commonwealth system, but also in the international development field, is its character as an intergovernmental organisation with a specific mandate, originating from the Member States of the Commonwealth, to support and advance civil society. There is an opportunity for the Foundation to draw on this **intergovernmental position** more consciously going forward.
- Gender is an essential component of the Foundation's identity, part of a vision that is based on inclusion and participation. The Foundation has had significant success integrating gender into its work, most particularly through the dedicated PGG programme **(see Example 1 in Box 1)**. However, there is also a perspective that, rather than a specialist area of focus, **gender and inclusion could be more effectively embedded as a cross-cutting theme** in the Foundation's vision.
- The Foundation shares the credibility of the Commonwealth family or brand with its **sister intergovernmental organisations**, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth of Learning. To effectively address its vision and serve the people of the Commonwealth, the Foundation has been increasing its collaboration with these organisations **(see Example 2 in Box 1)**. These efforts are seen very positively by stakeholders.

BOX 1 - Illustrative evidence of the Foundation addressing its vision

1. Convening practitioners to improve understanding of climate change impact on women in the Caribbean

The Commonwealth Foundation is supporting civil society groups in the Caribbean to understand the complex intersectional impact of climate change, especially on women and vulnerable communities, and to advocate effectively for the inclusion of less-heard voices in policy processes, for example through the convening of ‘conversations’ between very different civil society groups. Through a project partner based in Trinidad and Tobago, the Foundation was able to support the piloting of a ‘gender and climate change guidance tool’, designed by practitioners.⁵ This project stands as an example of successful cross-programme work within the Foundation, especially PGG and the Writers programme, enhancing the former’s political convening role with the latter’s creative potential. Writers were able to enhance public discourse through live performance and subsequent engagement, taking the complex discussions around the intersectionality of Gender and Climate Change out of the conference room and into the public sphere.

2. Diplomats Induction Programme

Each year, the Foundation jointly hosts the Diplomats Induction programme alongside the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth of Learning. This event provides an opportunity to build vital relationships with new appointees at London-based High Commissions and more broadly within the Commonwealth family and to raise awareness of the mission of the Commonwealth and its work. 2020 saw a marked increase in the collaboration between the Foundation and ComSec in organising this event, as well as a deeper involvement of the Foundation in its delivery.

The Foundation is uniquely placed to contribute to the vision of an inclusive and people-centred Commonwealth.

Describing the Foundation’s mission in support of this vision, Foundation staff and consulted stakeholders see an organisation that is working and should be continuing to work towards:

- Supporting the *active and constructive participation of Commonwealth citizens* in all aspects of their governance;
- Nurturing the growth of *vibrant and free civil societies* in all Commonwealth countries; and
- Actively working to advance the *principles and ideals of the Commonwealth*.

⁵ Cf. <https://commonwealthfoundation.com/resource/gender-analysis-guidance-tool/>

“We think that the Foundation continues to have a strong, clear role as representative for people, not just governments. This role is needed now more than ever in the present context in which it is increasingly challenging to bring civic voices into governance” (Stakeholder Quote)

The Review elicited the following key findings linked to this identity/mandate:

- Stakeholders recognise and appreciate the Foundation’s more recent efforts to **increase its outreach** and thereby expand civil society’s awareness of the existence of both the Foundation and the Commonwealth, and of what that means for them. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Foundation demonstrated the practical value of having a flexible and creative approach to programming drawing on digital approaches to expand its outreach. Many stakeholders expressed the opinion that this strategy should be continued.
- Initiatives such as the **Critical Conversations series** (see Example 1 in Box 2 and Example 1 in Box 4) that both embrace and challenge the Commonwealth’s shared history; that take on issues of contemporary critical concern; and that are widely inclusive of Commonwealth citizens -- have been very well received and have had a significant impact on the Foundation’s visibility and profile.
- Stakeholders appreciate and value the Foundation’s work on promoting and brokering **civil society participation in governance**. Examples referenced include championing civil society voices within Commonwealth ministerial processes (see Example 2 in Box 2) and involving civil society expertise in legislation and policy drafting (see Example 3 in Box 2).
- Stakeholders recognise that the work of the Foundation should be explicitly anchored in the **Commonwealth Charter**, which provides both mandate and direction for advancing Commonwealth principles and ideals.
- The Foundation’s ongoing support to **creative expression** is widely recognised as a powerful yet indirect way to bring more voices into discussion around issues that matter to the people of the Commonwealth, most especially those that may be difficult to address via more conventional routes (see Example 4 in Box 2). Stakeholders also flagged innovative and successful examples of ‘cross-fertilisation’ of creative expression work with the Foundation’s more ‘conventional’ participatory governance brokering work (see Example 1 in Box 2).
- The Foundation’s **capacity development role** is widely recognised and valued; it is also potentially an area that can be expanded to help support civil society partners in smaller, less engaged Member States that are relatively more fragile and thereby in a position to derive great benefit from such capacity development efforts. Stakeholders highlighted PGG-supported initiatives that explicitly seek to develop civil society capacity to network and advocate effectively for policy change. These include, for instance, capacity development work with the Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Project (FACRP) as part of a process of

supporting women and local communities to engage in climate change policy processes in the Caribbean.

- The Foundation has effectively implemented its 2017-21 Strategy commitment to mainstream **Knowledge, Learning and Communications (KLC)** across its programmes and across the organisation as a whole. Colleagues reflected on the potential for an enhanced use of relevant tools (such as outcome harvesting, currently being trialled within several programmes including Grants) and digital communications for future strengthening the Foundation's work in collecting, analysing and sharing results.
- There is wide recognition that the Foundation's budget is severely limited when measured against the potential scope of its mandate. Seeking **Extra-budgetary resources** for specific projects, as the Foundation is currently doing with Australia and Canada for example, is considered to be a potentially useful option to expand its reach and impact. Also building **strategic partnerships** that can leverage resources for specific programmes or projects was discussed. The Commonwealth Writers Prize, for example, could be have high-value sponsorship potential.
- There is agreement within the Foundation that its internal ways of working and decision-making should continue to be transparent and participatory: **modelling the values and approaches** that it endorses externally. Substantial changes that have been made since late 2019 (including a system of regular management and cross-team meetings; more communication from and with the Directorate; investment in communication platforms and processes) were viewed as encouraging a more involved, committed and cohesive team. The highly participatory process of this Review has further reinforced the value of ongoing cross-programme and staff-directorate discussions.

BOX 2 - Illustrative evidence of the Foundation acting through its unique position

1. Critical Conversations around 'A Commonwealth for All. Young Leaders Speak'

In its most recent Critical Conversations event in December 2020, the Foundation, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Youth Council, ComSec and the Queen's Commonwealth Trust, turned to Commonwealth youth to host a frank and inclusive conversation around their role in civil society and their expectations from the Commonwealth.⁶ Contributing panellists represented the span of the Commonwealth, covering all regions. By taking this event online, the Foundation was able to invite and include hundreds of citizens from across the Commonwealth, who led the discussion by posing questions to the young leaders. The final issue for discussion was around the upcoming Heads of Government meeting in Kigali in June, where panellists were asked about their demands for Commonwealth leaders. Additional feedback was sought and received from participants after the event and this will be used to help shape the 2021 Commonwealth People's Forum.

⁶ Cf. <https://commonwealthfoundation.com/events/a-commonwealth-for-all-young-leaders-speak/>

2. Bringing civil society into the Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministerial Meeting

The Foundation prioritises its role in supporting – sometimes even brokering – constructive engagement between civil society and government including at international and Commonwealth levels. Working closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat and a local partner, the Foundation convened the inaugural civil society roundtable ahead of the 12th Women's Affairs Ministerial Meeting (12WAMM) in Kenya, September 2019. Participants delivered a comprehensive Communique to the Senior Officials Meeting, contributing directly to the development of the outcome statement of the Ministers Meeting. In a landmark development for participatory governance at this level, it was agreed that such valuable involvement would become a permanent fixture of future WAMMs.

3. Shaping mental health legislation: Botswana and Seychelles, 2014-2018

With support from the Foundation, the Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation (CNMF) supported a collaborative review of mental health legislation in Botswana and Seychelles, aiming to influence the reform of colonial-era legislation and the alignment of national legal frameworks with new international medical and human rights standards. This is an example of how a cross-cutting Commonwealth theme was successfully addressed through tailored approaches at the country level. A *Mental Care Act* was adopted in Seychelles and a new bill was submitted to Parliament in Botswana as a result of this process. The Foundation has since published an article authored by the Seychelles Chief Medical Officer⁷ about the impact of this project and its approach that ensured “everyone who needed to play a part was included from the outset” and “provides a model for other African nations”.

4. adda: Connecting emerging writers through online storytelling

New and emerging writers struggle to get their work out into the world. The Foundation's online magazine *adda* has become an important platform for emerging talent and lesser-heard narratives from across the Commonwealth. This year saw an increase in the magazine's scope: more writers, from more diverse backgrounds, from more Commonwealth countries. Through its flexible online format, it is able to deliver tailored and timely responses to the issues facing civil society, for example by commissioning a series of texts on Covid-19⁸ from (among others) leading African writers Ben Okri and Mia Couto. These were accompanied by the Writers Programme's social media initiative #StoriesToConnectUs, also centred on the pandemic.

⁷ Cf. <https://commonwealthfoundation.com/us-and-them-time-for-a-paradigm-shift-in-african-mental-health-policy/>

⁸ Cf. <https://www.addastories.org/collection/covid-19/>

3.2 Current and Emerging Challenges

The Review has found widespread confirmation from within and outside the Foundation that its performance in strengthening civic voice has generally been effective within the limits of its capacities and resources, confirming the MTR's findings on performance and effectiveness. The strengthening of the Foundation's 'brand' and credibility, a hallmark of the recent period, affirms these as core assets that must form the platform to build on in the next Strategy period.

The Review also revealed a number of significant challenges facing the Foundation in its efforts to advance a more specific and Commonwealth-focused vision and mission for the next Strategy period and to meet its own high expectations as well as those of Member States and other stakeholders. Foundation staff and external stakeholders were open in articulating these challenges and in reflecting on ways of managing/overcoming them.

The challenge of maintaining focus and generating impact, while also responding to a broad mandate that generates high and sometimes conflicting expectations.

Taking its mandate at face value, the Foundation is entrusted with the responsibility of advancing the wide and varied interests of the Commonwealth's 2.4 billion citizens. By focusing on civil society, and by creating 'umbrellas' such as "participatory governance", 'civic voice' and 'lesser-heard voices / narratives' the Foundation has sought to narrow that mandate down to something that is more reasonably do-able. However, there is still a substantial mismatch between 'mandate and expectation' and between 'mandate and resources/capacity'.

The Review elicited the following key reflections on this mismatch:

- Where the Foundation focuses on **lesser-heard voices** and narratives, this is viewed positively by stakeholders and staff and is seen to be sufficiently flexible to be adapted appropriately across different regions and programmes.
- Some stakeholders reflected that the Foundation would benefit from using **thematic areas and regional approaches** more strategically to orient its work to support participatory governance processes, with different themes being selected perhaps in different strategy periods or for different regions. ComSec's division into thematic-based Directorates was cited as an example of good practice that could be worth exploring.
- Participants reflected further on the potential for more **strategic leveraging of learning and sharing** across the Commonwealth. When practiced effectively, this has involved drawing on successful experiences in one place or region to instigate change elsewhere, gleaning the most value possible from the Foundation's small budget and leveraging its unique geographical breadth. The learning exchanges promoted by KLC during the current strategy period are one potential example of this (see Example 1 in Box 3) as would be the sharing of the

Foundation's successful work around gender in West Africa with partners and civil society in other regions, including Southern Africa (**see Example 2 in Box 3**).

Box 3 - Maintaining focus while enabling learning across the Commonwealth

1. Learning together: sharing knowledge and ideas

Learning exchanges facilitated by the Foundation have proved to be a valuable opportunity for practitioners to interact directly with others working in a similar field, to share experiences and to build relationships for future collaboration. A learning exchange on health rights and accountable governance was convened by the Foundation and Commonwealth partners in Geneva in May 2019. In February 2020, The Foundation brought together representatives from six of its grant partners for a learning exchange on disability rights and accountable governance. An internal evaluation of the learning exchanges confirmed that almost all participants were able to report a resulting improvement or change within their projects / organisations. A majority of the review participants reported that their capacity to engage in policy had improved as a result of the exchanges.

2. Advocating for gender equality in West Africa

Women in West Africa continue to face challenges making their collective voice heard in decision-making spaces. The Foundation is providing targeted guidance and support to the Network for Women's Rights (NETRIGHT) in Ghana and the Advocacy Movement Network (AMNET) in Sierra Leone, aimed at strengthening the capacity of rural women to engage more effectively in local policy processes. The project focuses specifically on inclusion, intergenerational dialogue and challenging discrimination.

The challenge of delivering Foundation grant-making in ways that maximise impact and ensure support for nascent / relatively fragile civil society partners.

The Foundation has been widely recognised and praised for its strong performance in the area of grant-making (see MTR 2019) with robust systems of grant appraisal, funding and M&E. The Grants Programme has been critical in building the credibility of the Foundation as an inter-governmental Commonwealth institution that is accountable to its Member States while also being responsive to and supportive of Commonwealth civil society.

The Review elicited the following key reflections around addressing emerging trade-offs between robustness and inclusiveness:

- Despite ongoing efforts to refine application criteria and outreach, such as recently with the COVID 19 Special grants call (**see Box 4**), smaller and more fragile civil society organisations

often located in smaller and less involved countries and regions, continually **lose out on funding rounds** to relatively well-established organisations that are often based in larger Commonwealth countries. Those missing out are frequently representing or supporting the ‘lesser-heard voices’ that the Foundation explicitly seeks to engage.

Box 4 – Responsiveness and flexibility in grants making to ensure inclusiveness of fragile and marginalised civil society

Currently, grants have to meet rigorous criteria, necessitating robust logic models and recent audited accounts. The Foundation does consider explicitly, however, the needs of lower capacity organisations, and therefore requires that the average of the applicant’s total income over the last two years is less than £3 million.

In the autumn of 2020, the Foundation organised a COVID-19 Special grants call, focused on supporting civil society to engage with governments on COVID-19 response and recovery. All unspent funds in programming (due to the multiple cancellations brought on by the pandemic) were transferred to this call. The Special call was exceptionally open to applicants from those Commonwealth Member States that are in arrears and those that are not members of the Foundation (three of which were awarded a grant). Moreover, the eligibility criteria were lowered to encourage more, and lower capacity, CSOs to apply. With this Special call, the Foundation demonstrated responsiveness and flexibility; some of the measures it adapted might be considered in the future to increase the inclusiveness of its grants programme.

- A related challenge lies in the Foundation being seen as not equally relevant to / engaged with all its member States equally and equitably. As ‘engagement’ with the Foundation is often associated with grants, this perception is not necessarily correct as it overlooks the Foundation’s whole-of-Commonwealth work – from the People’s Forum to the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. It also overlooks other important programmatic work that actively seeks to engage less involved regions and countries: from craft development within the Writers programme to capacity development within PGG. However, even if not fully borne out by the evidence, such perceptions do matter, and they are reflected in tensions that can arise at governance level.
- Staff and external stakeholders reflected on ways of managing these twin challenges by **reconfiguring the grants programme** to make it more inclusive of, and supportive of, civil society organisations that are in a position, because of their size, geographical location and fragility, to derive relatively greater benefit from careful and strategic support. A diversified grant making portfolio could differentiate between grants and capacity development initiatives specifically aimed at such organisations and the more traditional grant-making that is recognised as a major Foundation success. For ‘emerging civil society partners’, investment in capacity development through a multi-layered grant-making strategy that includes approaches such as peer-to-peer learning might be especially beneficial.

3.3 Current and Emerging Opportunities

Foundation staff and external stakeholders highlighted what they consider valuable opportunities to advance the Foundation's mandate and vision into the next Strategy period. These included opportunities to increase the relevance, reach and impact of the Foundation's work by utilising new means of engagement and reorienting its focus to more strongly affirm and advance its Commonwealth identity and Commonwealth values. Participants also reflected on specific ways to better harness these opportunities based on learning during the current strategy period.

The Foundation should embed the creative and flexible approaches to programme planning and delivery that it adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic compelled the Foundation to radically rethink how it works across the board: from the ways in which it communicates and cooperates internally to the ways in which it could deliver its programmes and support partners. Governors, including Civil Society Governors (CSAG), and other stakeholders were unanimous in their praise for the Foundation's responsiveness this year, as well as for the creativity and flexibility that it demonstrated and is continuing to demonstrate. Examples include the Critical Conversation series which evolved out of a recognised need to entirely re-think the approach to planning for the Commonwealth People's Forum (see Example 1 in Box 5) and the Caribbean Shorts film workshop which responded to the reality of on-going travel restrictions with an entirely new approach to craft development delivery (see Example 2 in Box 5).

Stakeholders recognised, as did the Executive Committee at its December 2020 meeting, that adaptations made by the Foundation in response to the pandemic have provided a set of benefits that might otherwise have taken years to achieve – or may perhaps never have been conceivable under a 'business-as-usual' mindset. These include the massive cost savings made possible through remote technologies and the exponential increase in the Foundation's reach and impact. Both stakeholders and Foundation staff agreed that the benefits of these seismic shifts should be captured and nurtured; that new ways of thinking and working that have proved their value should be incorporated into future strategic planning; that the adaptiveness and flexibility that has proved so important should be sustained into the future.

“COVID has forced us to change our ways of working: people can work and engage from anywhere. Physical barriers for local organisations to engage in global, regional and national processes are gone. For the Foundation this is a unique opportunity to become truly global in its reach and truly local in its work.” (Stakeholder Quote)

The Review elicited the following key reflections around seizing the opportunity for changed ways of working:

- The Foundation has deftly utilised new technologies to massively expand its **outreach**. These experiences point to a potential for not only expanding its reach but also **democratising** the Foundation's programming by making it much more inclusive.

- Participants identified specific areas where this type of adaptation might add real value in the Foundation's mandate. For example:
 - **Permanent hybrid elements** should be part of all future Commonwealth People's Forums and the Critical Conversation Series could become a standing feature of a reconceived CPF, creating much-needed continuity between CHOGMs; and
 - Online platforms (whether stand-alone or in conjunction with in-person elements) can be used to **improve outreach and extend public conversations** across other parts of the Foundation's programming: increasing participation, lowering costs and increasing flexibility;
 - Improved digital outreach can build on the good practice in **strategic leveraging of learning exchanges** promoted by KLC during the current strategy period (discussed and illustrated in Section 3.2 above).

Box 5 – New approaches emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic

1. Giving voice to more Commonwealth citizens in more countries: The Commonwealth People's Forum and Critical Conversation Series

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) was originally scheduled to take place in Kigali, Rwanda in June 2020, as part of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). CHOGM (and thereby CPF) has been postponed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Foundation reported to the Executive Committee in June 2020 that it was planning and budgeting for a hybrid CPF: one that combines traditional event elements with online aspects in the programme design.

As part of its adaptive response to the challenge of the current operating environment and in preparation for a reinvigorated CPF, the Foundation launched an online event series in September, as mentioned above: *'People of the Commonwealth: Critical Conversations'*. The online series seeks to bring together dynamic and diverse speakers to deliver frank and fresh perspectives on questions that really matter to the Commonwealth's 2.4 billion citizens. While the series covers a broad range of topics, the central themes come back to the core values and principles of the Commonwealth including democracy, human rights, participatory governance and the rule of law. The series is explicitly designed to feed content and ideas into CPF 2020. It is also providing the Foundation with an invaluable opportunity to test, refine and strengthen its online event hosting capacity—another direct contribution to CPF itself.

It has been noted that one of the major weaknesses of CPF is the lack of any continuity between forums. Each CPF is essentially a stand-alone event with only a small constituency and little follow-up and correspondingly limited effect. It is hoped that the Critical Conversations series will provide some insight into how the Foundation can reconceive the CPF as something much more than a biannual event of limited reach and impact.

2. Using savings to increase grants while maintaining quality: The new-look Commonwealth Shorts Caribbean Voices film workshop

This workshop was initially conceived as a 5-day residential in Barbados, but due to the pandemic was shifted online, over an 8-day period. Cost savings were used to support the participation of additional filmmakers and to increase grants. The success of this workshop points to the possibility of combining virtual and in-person elements for future programming to maximise the Foundation's limited budget and to reach more participants. This will have to be organised carefully to ensure that face-to-face elements remain a priority, as they provide irreplaceable opportunities for connection and networking.

Opportunities to shape a more flexible, responsive and dynamic Foundation staff team should be actively explored.

Changes dictated – and made possible by – the pandemic extended to the Foundation's own internal processes and ways of working. While the Foundation experienced many of the challenges common to other organisations, it also realised a number of substantial benefits including a capacity to 'do-more-with-less' as a result of reallocation of staff time and energies. This may indicate an opportunity to consider moving towards a more flexible Foundation workforce. For example, at present, all staff are required to be London-based and, with only one narrow exception, the entire team is full-time. The Foundation's experience confirms that different ways of working are possible and positive – and that more creative thinking around staffing should be part of the future strategic planning process.

Opportunities to establish or strengthen valuable partnerships across the Commonwealth system should be identified and taken up.

The Foundation is firmly anchored to the broader Commonwealth project and it can be both hoped and expected that this will be even more so as it moves into a new Strategic Plan. As such, it is more important than ever that the Foundation strengthen its formal and informal ties with other members of the Commonwealth family. Paramount amongst these are the other intergovernmental bodies: most importantly the Commonwealth Secretariat but also the Commonwealth of Learning. Several of the Commonwealth-accredited organisations whose mandates and ways of working link them closely to the Foundation (such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association) should also be considered for closer, and more strategically oriented, partnership.

The Review elicited the following key reflections around seizing the opportunity for strengthening partnerships across the Commonwealth system:

- The new Directorate has **prioritised closer collaboration** with ComSec over the last period, and this is generally viewed very positively, including by ComSec itself. As discussed in Section 3.1 above, stakeholders appreciate and value the Foundation's work on promoting and brokering civil society participation in governance, illustrated by its championing of civil society

voices within Commonwealth ministerial processes. To maximise this brokering role, there is clear space for complementarity among the two organisations, with ComSec opening doors on the ‘supply-side’ of governance and the Foundation convening and supporting demand-side civic voices. A good example of this complementary relation is the Women’s Ministerial Meeting in Kenya (see Example 2 in Box 2).

- In this collaborative role, there is consensus that the Foundation’s niche should **combine exercise of its convening power with capacity development** of strategically selected civil society organisations in support of their effective engagement in policy and advocacy. Beyond this, the Foundation itself has a soft diplomacy role within the Commonwealth system, drawing on the Commonwealth Charter to gently ‘nudge’ Member States towards upholding Commonwealth values and principles. As one stakeholder within the Commonwealth system put it: *“The Commonwealth is a force for global good - everyone in the system has to see themselves in this way.”*
- There is a natural fit between ComSec (focused on Member States) and the Foundation (focused on Commonwealth citizens). Many of those consulted during this review saw multiple opportunities both to deepen and broaden their collaboration in ways that could bring great mutual benefit. The Diplomats Induction Programme, most particularly in its 2020 iteration, was cited as a strong example (see Example 2 in Box 1). Recent collaboration between the Foundation and ComSec around London Cancer Week was also pointed to as indicative of complementarity in the areas of health and gender that potentially exists across other areas of mutual interest. A number of interviewees noted the value of the three intergovernmental arms of the Commonwealth aligning their vision and even considering shared performance indicators around common issues / areas of work.
- Such collaboration could be usefully supplemented by the Foundation carefully **building strategic alliances and partnerships outside the Commonwealth**, most especially with other intergovernmental organisations and grant-making organisations. Such an approach is in keeping with the Foundation’s status as an IGO with a capacity to work with other IGOs. It will also help to solidify the identity of the Foundation and increase its potential reach and influence.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final section, we translate the findings emerging from Section 3 above into a forward-looking set of recommendations to be tested and discussed during the upcoming Strategy development phase.

Build on recent innovations to develop new ways of working and communicating

Staff and external stakeholders shared a vision for the future in which the Foundation builds on the emerging lessons learned and new practices implemented over the past year, not least as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In substance, this would move the Foundation towards more flexible, creative approaches to its work that take full advantage of modern technology to expand both depth and reach of engagement while also seeking to preserve the connecting value of physical spaces.

As noted above, the CPF provides a useful illustration of how this might work in practice. CPF has traditionally involved the Foundation organising a single physical event in a single location with a large staff presence and several hundred participants, up to half of whom are supported by the Foundation to attend. A new approach would see CPF reconceived as a key moment in a continuous online set of conversations encompassing a more fluid coverage of a wider range of themes and channels (including themes emerging from the socioeconomic impacts of a ‘covidised world’) organised and supported by the Foundation. The CPF itself would likely be a hybrid: combining online elements with a more modest physical event. Critically, it would draw inspiration and direction from the online conversations that would both precede and follow it. The experience of convening the Critical Conversations events, which has attracted a large and diverse following, is instructive here (see **Example 1 in Box 2 and Example 1 in Box 5**).

In upcoming strategy discussions, the Foundation should be encouraged to analyse the potential advantages of developing new ways of communication, engagement and delivery including:

- Greater outreach, more inclusive spaces and greater relevance to/visibility to Commonwealth citizens (including youth);
- The opportunity to bring decision makers into more responsive spaces combined with greater agility in identifying and switching between themes;
- Cost savings and more agile use of staff resources (including through sustaining lower levels of staff travel) .

Consider new means of programme delivery that offer the opportunity to increase impact and secure greater involvement of governors, including Civil Society Governors (CSAG)

The Foundation is an ‘implementing organisation’ to the extent that, outside of its formal grants programme, it develops and directly engages in a range of initiatives that fall under the broad organising umbrellas of “participatory governance” and “stronger civil voices”. Most of these initiatives are conceived and developed within the PGG (see **Example 1 in Box 1 and Example 2 in Box 3**) and Writers Programme (see **Example 4 in Box 2**). This approach carries certain distinct advantages, not

least enabling the Foundation to work with a wide range of partners and providing a level of flexibility that enables it to seize opportunities. However, it also means that, while these areas of the Foundation's work can be argued to contribute to broadly worded goals, they may lack strong coherence with an overall strategic approach. This is a particular risk within the present structure, where 'programmes' such as PGG are relatively self-contained. Also, this Review found that irrespective of their objective value, these parts of the Foundation's work are (especially in comparison with the Grants Programme) less known and understood by governors and other stakeholders.

This Review recommends that the Foundation considers whether (and if so, how) aspects of its current structure and programming could be adapted to increase coherence with the future vision and mission which is emerging through internal work and consultation with stakeholders. This will enable the Foundation to respond to opportunities revealed by the Review that include:

- Giving more breathing space to the Foundation's limited budget and human resources, directing energy and funding towards the sponsorship, rather than ideation, of more projects;
- The ability to include a greater number of regions and countries as partners / recipients, responding to Member State requests and serving more and lesser-heard voices;
- The opportunity to develop transparent and consistent processes in the selection of programming and the direction of the Foundation's work, thus being truly responsive to civil society needs and requests;
- Revisiting how best to 'package' the Foundation's work in a language and framing that resonates with Member States.

One possible scenario that deserves consideration would involve transforming aspects of current programming into 'grants'. For example, if the Foundation decided that work on translation, or on gender and climate change could be part of its portfolio, then rather than developing a project of its own, it would invite or seek out civil society partners to work in this space with the explicit goal of putting those partners 'in the driver's seat'. Grants proposals would be considered not just on their individual merits, but also on the basis of their potential to contribute to a specific strategic goal. Governors would be involved in approving such 'grants', thereby increasing both visibility and support.

Consider how the Foundation's grant making can be sharpened to increase its relevance and impact, including through a strategic focus on less well-developed civil society organisations and networks

External stakeholders highlighted the great strength that is the Foundation's grants programme. As one interviewee pointed out, grants render the Foundation unique in the Commonwealth system due to their provision of direct material support to Commonwealth civil society. However, as explained above, questions have been raised around equity in access as the Foundation operates its grant making according to a very clear set of appraisal criteria that tend to favour higher-capacity NGOs. This Review recommends that the Foundation consider dedicated funding options for supporting smaller civil society groups, weak in capacity but with the potential to be an effective voice in governance in their country and region. Such support should be explicitly directed to helping these less developed organisations

build their capacity in relation to both participation and advocacy through a multi-layered grant-making strategy that includes approaches such as peer-to-peer learning.

Such a funding model might be extended, for instance, through third party NGO partners with in-country/ region capacity development skills. It also might involve different grant-making procedures, such as closed calls with a pre-selected group of civil society organisations or open calls limited to specific regions. As noted above, it will be important to consider how aspects of the Foundation's current programming outside of 'grants' could be brought within this model: not just to improve overall coherence, but also to free up the space and resources to expand the grants portfolio.

In its upcoming discussions the Foundation should consider in more detail how a future strategy might respond to the potential advantages of grant making innovation, including:

- Encouraging greater levels of engagement amongst all Member States through a shared recognition that the Foundation is explicitly reaching out beyond higher-capacity civil society partners to identify and embrace 'diamonds in the rough';
- Bringing in a greater diversity of voices and themes and a stronger sense of localism in the Foundation's approach to participatory governance;
- Building grassroots organisations and networks for a long-term/ sustainable institutional impact.

Consider how the Foundation can best leverage its unique 'creative' function to serve its vision and mission

One of the Foundation's distinctive features is its creative dimension, which centres on the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and has come to incorporate a wide range of initiatives that revolve around the idea that stories and storytelling are important and powerful ways of conveying the people's 'voice'. In some respects, this aspect of the Foundation's work does not fit neatly into the more traditional 'development' narrative that has evolved around its identity. This is perhaps a complication but should not be seen as a weakness.

The Review recommends that the Foundation considers how the 'creative' part of its work can be refined to:

- Feed into the broader vision and mission, including a stronger and more explicit connection with the Commonwealth;
- Move beyond 'writers' to affirm a broader view of what 'creativity' might mean for what the Foundation can support and advance;
- Contribute to the proposed revision of the Foundation's grant-making as set out above.

Consider how to strengthen the Foundation's own capacity to lead and its intergovernmental role within the Commonwealth family

It has been widely noted throughout the Review process that the Foundation is uniquely positioned: an intergovernmental organisation with a convening role and mandate to support civil society voice. Utilising the guiding principles of the Commonwealth Charter, the Foundation is able to exercise 'soft

power' to encourage Member States to protect and uphold Commonwealth values, and to remind them of their shared commitment to the Commonwealth as a global public good. The Review agrees with the position of the Directorate that this part of the Foundation's work has never been more urgent, or more important.

Over the past year, the Foundation has been more active as an advocate for Commonwealth values. This has been noted as a positive development by stakeholders including governors and, in our view, should continue.

This Review recommends that the Foundation analyse the strategic options and necessary conditions to respond fully to the opportunities presented by its unique position at this very challenging time, including:

- The ability to interpret civil society priorities to Member States in strategically significant forums including ministerial spaces, with better results;
- The ability to publicly speak for Commonwealth principles and values and to provide platforms for others to speak;
- The opportunity to build the Foundation's reputation as a 'critical friend' to Member States in this process;
- The prospect of building on collaborative relations with ComSec and other intergovernmental bodies to co-create spaces and platforms for civil society voices, building on a renewed sense of shared purpose and mutual recognition of their distinct but complementary roles;
- The opportunity to revisit how best to 'package' the Foundation's work in a language and framing that resonates with Member States.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 – Documents Reviewed

Foundation Work plans and Reports

- 2019-2020 Annual Report
- 2020-2021 Annual Work Plan and Budget
- Annual Report and financial statements for the year ended 30 June 2019
- Capacity Development Framework, June 2019
- Commonwealth Foundation Strategy Plan 2017-2021

Evaluations

- Commonwealth Foundation Mid-term Review (May 2019)
- Evaluation of 2012-16 Commonwealth Foundation Strategy

KLC

- Brief to Directorate on Outcome Harvesting roll out
- (Commonwealth Writers) Community Survey 2020: Summary Report
- Learning and Communications Strategy
- Post Learning Exchange Report: Accountability in disability and health rights

Executive Committee, December 2020

- CF (2020/21) EC1-5A Mid-year update focusing on COVID-19 responses and adaptations
- CF (2020/21) EC1-5B Update on '*People of the Commonwealth: Critical Conversations*' event series and preparations for the 2021 Commonwealth People's Forum

Programme documents

- Final Narrative and Financial Report: Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Project (FACRP)
- Gender and its Intersectionality: Guidelines for Programming and Engagement in Governance
- Mission Report: Accountable governance for people with disabilities: a learning exchange
- Mission Report: Mental Health Project, Botswana
- Project Appraisal: Improve youth participation in public policy decision-making
- Project Appraisal: Reforming mental health legislation across the Commonwealth

ANNEX 2 – Stakeholders Interviewed

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>
Ambassador Shree Servansing	Chair of the Commonwealth Foundation
His Excellency Mr Milton Inniss	High Commissioner of Barbados; Chair of the Executive Committee of the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth Foundation and
Dr Arjoon Suddhoo	Deputy Secretary General, Commonwealth Secretariat
Mr Layne Robinson	Head of Social Policy Development, Commonwealth Secretariat
Mr Nabeel Goheer	Assistant Secretary General, Commonwealth Secretariat
Mr Vijay Krishnarayan	Former Director General, Commonwealth Foundation
Her Excellency Ms Winnie Kiap	High Commissioner of Papua New Guinea
Mr Duncan Howitt	Counsellor, Australia High Commission
Her Excellency Ms Karen Mae-Hill	High Commissioner of Antigua and Barbuda
Ms Sarah Lingard and Ms Anna Howells	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office UK
Mr Omar Rename	Counsellor Mozambique High Commission
Members of the Coalition of Commonwealth Accredited Organisations	Convened by the International Federation of Commonwealth Organisations
Ms Yoke Ling Chee	Director, Third World Network
Mr Mario Gerada	PhD candidate, University of Malta
Ms Nana Afadzinu	Executive Director, West Africa Civil Society Institute
Ms Goretti Kyomuhendo, Dr Marlene Attzs, Ms Celia Wade-Brown and Mr Ajay Chhabra	Civil Society Advisory Governors
Mr Marc Jurgens	Counsellor, South Africa High Commission
Mr Joel Nerve Nguenkam	Counsellor, Cameroon Commonwealth Department

Mr Myles Wickstead	CPF Content Design Committee member Former Civil Society Governor
Ms Rosie Miller	Policy Officer, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Ms Diana McCaulay	Writer and Former CEO of the Jamaica Environment Trust
Ms Qairunnisa Md Alias	Political Counsellor, Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Mr Patrick Spaven	MEL advisor

