



Report of impact and change

2021–2026



The Commonwealth Foundation is an intergovernmental organisation mandated by its member countries to advance the interests of Commonwealth civil society. Upholding a firm commitment to the principles and ideals of the Commonwealth, the Foundation seeks to nurture the growth of vibrant and free societies: championing the active and constructive participation of people in all aspects of their governance.

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Edited by Claire Berry
Designed by Small Axe
Printed by Calverts on 100% recycled paper made from post-consumer waste

Cover images (from left):

Manufacturers of craft goods from natural fibres and recycled garment waste in Bangladesh, Arawa Maori women break into celebratory waiata-a-ringa songs in New Zealand, nurse and midwife in Zambia who educates local people about waterborn diseases.

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Welcome from the Chair of the Board

I am filled with pride as I reflect on my first year as Chair of the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth Foundation. This report shares a story of hope, determination and evolution. Strategic successes underscore the Foundation's relevance within the Commonwealth family, and its proven ability to learn demonstrates that the Foundation is responsive, resilient and ready for the next chapter.



Her Excellency Winnie Anna Kiap CBE

It has been a privilege to inherit the position of Chair from Ambassador Sudha Devi K. R. Vasudevan, whose steadfast governance has laid the groundwork for my tenure. My first year has been further defined by the seamless leadership transition, ably steered by the Foundation's newly appointed Director-General, Ms Razmi Farook.

The past five years have seen the Foundation evolve into a true champion for civil society. By focussing its attention on three key issues—**health justice, climate justice and freedom of expression**—we have been able to push further than ever before. The Foundation's work has empowered citizens, achieved legislative change and fostered thriving communities across the Commonwealth. While these efforts have spanned every region, I am most heartened by the commitment to **small and vulnerable states**, and I commend the Foundation for creating platforms for these marginalised voices to be heard.

Bright moments in our strategic period include the **Commonwealth People's Forums** in Rwanda in 2022, and Samoa in 2024. These events have become a transformational space for civil society to debate solutions to the challenges they face, and a powerful platform for meaningful dialogue with government. With preparations gaining momentum for the 2026 People's Forum, I look forward to meeting many of you in Antigua and Barbuda in November, and to hearing civil society voicing their key asks for Commonwealth leaders.

We are grateful to **member countries** for their continued support and engagement. In our drive for universal membership, highlights of this strategic period include the return of **The Gambia, Maldives and Samoa**, and the entry of **Gabon and Saint Christopher and Nevis**. Travelling to **Fiji** earlier this year for the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting afforded us the opportunity to meet with civil society partners and government representatives to better understand how the Foundation can be of service. It is my sincere hope that Fiji, as well as the other remaining Commonwealth countries—**Nauru, Singapore, Togo and Tuvalu**—will join us in the coming years.

As Chair, I have been supported immeasurably by the sustained commitment of the Foundation's governors. I sincerely thank HE Mr Jeremiah Nyamane Mamabolo, High Commissioner for South Africa, for his steadfast leadership of the Executive Committee; and HE Dr Morie Komba Manyeh, High Commissioner for the

'We have proven that the voices of civil society must always be centred, and the profound potential this has for social change.'

Republic of Sierra Leone, for his valued service in the role as Chair of the Grants Committee. My thanks also go to previous Chairs of the Executive Committee, HE Dr Farahanaz Faizal and HE Mr Milton Inniss; and Chairs of the Grants Committee, HE Dr Kevin M Isaac and HE Mr Milton Inniss. I am extremely grateful to the Foundation's Civil Society Advisory Governors, who have embraced their roles wholeheartedly, particularly as we progress towards the 2026 People's Forum.

I also offer my gratitude to the Foundation team for their professional excellence. The recent period of transition has benefitted from a **seamless handover that preserved momentum** while injecting fresh energy into the Foundation's mission. Past Director-General, Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO, led the Foundation with wise guidance through the first four years of this strategic period, exceeding its strategic goals and leaving behind a legacy of integrity, transparency and innovation. Her successor, Ms Razmi Farook, has matched this commitment, significantly improving the visibility of the Foundation and ensuring successful **completion of the current strategic cycle** in her first year. Completing the leadership transition, we recently bid a warm farewell to Deputy Director-General, Mr Shem Ochola OGW, and welcomed Ms Clara T. Cole into the role from January 2026. I am grateful for Shem's dedicated service and look forward to continuing to work with Clara in the years ahead.

Looking to the next strategic period, I am confident that the past five years have equipped the Foundation to respond to a rapidly changing global context. We are not merely closing a chapter, but moving forward with all we have learned. We have proven that the **voices of civil society must always be centred**, and the profound potential this has for social change. We carry this conviction onward, alongside the values of justice, equality and solidarity that are hallowed in the Commonwealth Charter.

'The past five years have equipped the Foundation to respond to a rapidly changing global context.'

Her Excellency Winnie Anna Kiap CBE
Chair of the Board

Introduction from the Director-General

Leading the Commonwealth Foundation through the final year of the current strategic period has been profoundly rewarding. Establishing and strengthening relationships across our diverse network—most importantly with grassroots communities—has reinforced my belief that the Foundation is a vital bridge-builder in an increasingly complex and fragmented world.



Ms Razmi Farook

Our strategic period (2021–2026) has been marked by uncertainty on an international scale. Rising geopolitical and economic instability has led to an increasingly challenging operating environment, yet the Foundation and its work have grown stronger and more relevant than ever.

The Foundation has exceeded its ambitious strategic goals. We need only point to our empowered and active civil society: through providing platforms and opportunities, we have facilitated dialogue and meaningful participation, resulting in policy changes which will have a profoundly positive impact on the lives of Commonwealth people. I am particularly proud of our achievements for small and vulnerable states, and our dedication to creativity that has seen the **Commonwealth Short Story Prize** continue to expand its reach. The results of our work, presented in detail throughout this report, showcase a story of resilience, persistence and innovation across our diverse Commonwealth.

Our strategic planning process for the Foundation's next chapter has been a cornerstone of my first year in office. We have committed to a **deeply consultative approach**, ensuring our future direction is shaped by those we serve. Civil society consultations across all regions of the Commonwealth have allowed us to listen to and learn from Commonwealth communities: valuable cultural insights and geographical perspectives will ensure our strategy is grounded, responsive and ambitious.

The strength of any organisation lies in its people, and I extend my deepest gratitude to the Foundation team, whose dedication has been instrumental in ensuring a successful conclusion to this strategic period. We have continued to build on our pool of talent including a significant evolution within our leadership team. In January 2026, I was delighted to welcome Ms Clara T. Cole to the position of Deputy Director-General who brings a wealth of experience from the Commonwealth. At the same time, I extend my heartfelt thanks to our outgoing Deputy Director-General, Mr Shem Ochola OGW, whose dedicated service and leadership have left an indelible mark on the fabric of the Foundation.

‘I am committed to harnessing the rich insights and experiences captured in this report to renew and invigorate the Foundation’s vision.’

I am indebted to our governors and **member countries**, whose support and stewardship enables us to strive for our ambitious goals. They play an important part in shaping and guiding our work. A special thanks is deserved by our Chair, Her Excellency Winnie Anna Kiap for her invaluable wisdom and steady guidance in the early months of my role. Excellency Kiap continues to be an important source of support as we evolve and strengthen the work of the Foundation.

I would also like to give special thanks to my predecessor, Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO. The Foundation is indebted to her strong leadership over this past strategic period, and the impact and change we celebrate throughout this report bears her hallmark.

As we prepare to embark on our new strategic journey for 2026–2031, we recognise that this moment presents both challenges and opportunities. I am committed

to harnessing the rich insights and experiences captured in this report to **renew and invigorate the Foundation’s vision**. Our purpose and ambition remain unwavering: a Commonwealth whose diversity reflects the complexity of the wider international system, yet provides a dynamic platform for dialogue, partnership and practical cooperation. In this context, the Foundation will work to ensure civil society, creativity and people-to-people connection play catalytic roles in sustaining trust, accountability and **collaboration across borders**. We will work hard to remain impactful and continue to champion the Commonwealth’s shared values of democracy, equality and justice.

Finally, I must dedicate this report, and the successes it encapsulates, to the people of the Commonwealth we have worked so hard to serve over the past five years. Your partnership, participation and contribution will remain at the forefront of the Foundation’s work, always.

Ms Razmi Farook
Director-General

Ms Razmi Farook with Ms Clara T. Cole, Deputy Director-General



Our structure and governance

The Commonwealth Foundation was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1965 to embody their commitment to building an organisation that would be as much an association of peoples as of governments. This founding principle remains at the heart of the Commonwealth's mission.

As one of the intergovernmental pillars of the Commonwealth, the Foundation occupies a unique position—a vital bridge between governments and the people they serve. Our Member States set the Foundation's strategic direction and fund our programmes through assessed contributions. It is to them, first and foremost, that we are accountable.

Member States have explicitly mandated the Foundation to advance the interests of civil society, placing us firmly in the service of the **2.7 billion citizens of the Commonwealth family**. Our mission is to empower civil society to engage meaningfully and constructively with governments, ensuring that citizens' voices are heard and reflected in the decisions that shape their lives.

'The values enshrined in the Charter—justice, equality, and inclusion—provide the Foundation with both its mandate and its moral compass. They shape our programmes, drive our partnerships, and inspire our commitment to empowering the people of the Commonwealth.'

'Member States have explicitly mandated the Foundation to advance the interests of civil society, placing us firmly in the service of the **2.7 billion citizens of the Commonwealth family**.'

Commonwealth Charter

The Foundation places the Commonwealth Charter at the centre of its work. Everything we do is aimed at realising the Commonwealth envisioned in the Charter—a Commonwealth of **free and democratic societies**; a Commonwealth that respects **human rights** and the **rule of law**; a Commonwealth that values all people and protects the natural environment we share.

The Foundation's unwavering commitment to the Charter is strengthened by its clear affirmation of the central role of civil society as '**partners in promoting and supporting Commonwealth values and principles**.'

The values enshrined in the Charter—**justice, equality, and inclusion**—provide the Foundation with both its mandate and its moral compass. They shape our programmes, drive our partnerships, and inspire our commitment to empowering the people of the Commonwealth.

Governance bodies

Annual priorities are confirmed by a Board of Governors, comprising representatives of Commonwealth governments and High Commissioners based in London. The Chair of the Foundation is a distinguished private citizen of a Commonwealth country appointed by Heads of Government.

Selected members of the Board meet biannually as the Executive Committee to review resources, programmes and financial affairs. A sub-committee of the Executive Committee, the Grants Committee, assesses applications for grant funding twice a year.

The Commonwealth Foundation has a tradition of involving civil society in its governance structure. Five Civil Society Advisory Governors, each representing a region of the Commonwealth, are appointed by the Board to provide guidance on our programmes and long-term strategy.



Marlborough House, Headquarters of the Commonwealth of Nations

Our Commonwealth partners

The Foundation firmly believes that stronger and more strategic collaboration between the Commonwealth’s intergovernmental pillars—especially with the Secretariat—is essential to maximising the impact and effectiveness of our work and that of the Commonwealth as a whole.

Over the past five years, our efforts to deepen engagement with the Commonwealth Secretariat have focused on advancing Commonwealth action in our strategic areas of **health justice, climate justice, and freedom of expression**, alongside our cross-cutting priorities of **gender equality, small and vulnerable states, and young people**. While progress has not always been easy or straightforward, there have been important successes.

Notably, our collaboration has helped secure a meaningful space for civil society engagement in the context of **Commonwealth ministerial meetings** (see pages 20–23). We have also worked closely with

the Secretariat around the two **Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM)** covered by this report, and during the preparatory process for CHOGM 2026. The refinements we introduced to the jointly organised **roundtable between Foreign Ministers and civil society** stand out as a compelling example of partnership leading to strong results for both Commonwealth citizens and Member States.

Through our capacity strengthening grants facility we provided direct financial support to the 2025 Commonwealth Youth Awards, following a successful collaboration that enabled twenty finalists to carry out their development projects.



The Institute of Commonwealth Studies leading a side event at the 2024 People’s Forum on human rights-based approaches to criminal law

Other areas of growing collaboration over the past five years include administration, people management, and staff training. As sister organisations, the Foundation and the Secretariat are well-positioned to learn from each other and to achieve greater efficiencies through enhanced coordination of systems and services.

However, we are convinced that more can—and must—be achieved through a closer and more strategic relationship. The potential for deeper alliance remains significant, and we look forward to working with the new Secretary-General and the Secretariat to unlock that potential in the years ahead.

Leveraging the Commonwealth network

Our function as a bridge between Commonwealth Member States and civil society is further enriched by our role as **guide, collaborator, and conduit of information** for the broader family of accredited organisations across the Commonwealth. We have prioritised strengthening those relationships throughout the strategic period, providing timely briefings on the Foundation’s work and opportunities for collaboration, including at regular meetings of the umbrella convening bodies that bring many of these organisations together.

The Foundation actively cultivates relationships with the accredited organisations that align with our strategic focus areas. We have consistently sought their advice and expertise—particularly when identifying speakers and partners for key initiatives such as the People’s Forum and our online events.

During the reporting period, this has included meaningful engagements with a wide range of Commonwealth-accredited organisations, including the Association of Commonwealth Universities, Royal Commonwealth Society, CommonAge, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Commonwealth Association of Planners, Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work, Kaleidoscope International Trust, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Commonwealth Health Partners Alliance (and its member organisations), and the Commonwealth Journalists Association.

Within the United Kingdom, the Foundation has developed and sustained a strong relationship with the **All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Commonwealth**. We have supported a series of events aimed at exploring the future of the Commonwealth from the perspectives of different Member States—strengthening understanding and encouraging dialogue between governments and civil society.

Our engagement with accredited organisations over the past five years has laid a strong foundation for deeper collaboration. By working more strategically with these partners, we can extend our reach, strengthen our impact, and ensure that the voices of civil society continue to shape the Commonwealth’s future.

Jacqueline Wong, CommonAge, speaking at the Foreign Ministers Roundtable at CHOGM 2024



‘Over the past five years, our efforts to deepen engagement with the Secretariat have focused on advancing Commonwealth action in our strategic areas of health justice, climate justice, and freedom of expression, alongside our cross-cutting priorities of gender equality, small and vulnerable states, and young people.’

Strategic overview and evolution

In June 2021, the Foundation’s Board of Governors approved a new five-year strategic plan, reaffirming the Foundation’s vision of a Commonwealth of equal, just, and inclusive societies. The plan sets out a clear mission to contribute to that vision by:

- Supporting the active and constructive participation of Commonwealth citizens in all aspects of their governance
- Nurturing the growth of vibrant and free civil societies across the Commonwealth
- Advancing the principles and ideals of the Commonwealth

Our focus areas

Our strategy is grounded in the conviction that **focus drives impact**. Governors agreed that concentrating our efforts on three defined areas—**health, environment and climate change, and freedom of expression**—would strengthen our ability to deliver meaningful results and deepen our contribution to broader Commonwealth priorities. A more tightly focused approach would also ensure more coherent and connected programming, helping the Foundation strengthen its profile and identity within the Commonwealth.

In **June 2023**, governors approved a further refinement of these focus areas to sharpen alignment with the Foundation’s evolving strategic priorities. The revised focus areas—**health justice, climate justice, and freedom of expression**—reflect the realities of the Commonwealth and the Foundation’s growing expertise and demonstrated capacity to make an impact in these areas.

This refinement brings the Foundation’s work into closer alignment with specific sub-goals of the relevant **Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 3** (good health and wellbeing), **SDG 13** (climate action), and **SDG 16** (peace, justice, and strong institutions), as well as the values and spirit of the **Commonwealth Charter**.

Three cross-cutting themes are prioritised throughout our work: **gender equality, small and vulnerable states, and young people**. These themes reflect the Foundation’s commitment to ensuring that our work is truly responsive to the diverse needs of Commonwealth citizens.



Gender equality

We understand that gender inequality is a major challenge to our vision of a Commonwealth of just and inclusive societies.

Small and vulnerable states

We recognise that civil society in some of our Member States requires special attention and support.

Young people

We actively encourage the involvement of young people in advancing the principles and values of the Commonwealth Charter.

Focus areas (left) and cross-cutting themes (right). Images ©: Monash University (CC BY-NC2.0), DFID UK (CC BY-NC-ND).

Capturing impact and change

The 2021–2026 strategic plan introduced a clear ‘pathway to change’ which shows exactly what we aim to achieve, and how. Our strategic results framework builds on this by setting clear progress markers of change for each of our higher-level goals: what we expect to see because of our work; what we would *like* to see; and what we would *love* to see. In 2024, we refined the strategic results framework (see Annex) to strengthen the evidence base for evaluating the strategic plan and shaping the next phase of the Foundation’s work.

Methodology

Understanding the true impact of our work requires more than just data—it must be complemented by a clear narrative that connects strategy with results. As part of this report, the Foundation has worked with external experts, Collaborative Impact, to validate our data and prepare a series of case studies that highlight the most significant examples of how our work has driven change across the Commonwealth. These case studies capture evidence of concrete shifts in **behaviours, relationships, legislation, policies, and procedures**—illustrating the Foundation’s specific contributions to real-world outcomes.

Our final selection of eight case studies reflects the full breadth of the Foundation’s work, having shortlisted the most significant results across the Foundation’s portfolio, based on their contribution to our strategic goals.

For each case study, our independent monitoring and evaluation consultants collected evidence from our programme reports and interviewed key informants directly involved in the change process and in the context where change took place. Responses to questions probing the Foundation’s contribution to the higher-level results identified in our strategy provided evidence against our ‘progress markers’. The case studies are woven into our broader story of impact and change across all aspects of our work.

Key results

A series of icons is used to express the key results of our case studies and the connections with our higher-level goals.



Strategic planning for 2026–2031

Planning and development of our next strategy began in October 2025. A Peer Review Committee comprising external experts, representatives from the Board of Governors and Civil Society Advisory Governors, and partners from across the Commonwealth system was convened to provide steering and expertise throughout the strategic planning process.

Our **Strategy Review Report**, written by external consultants Collaborative Impact, provides vital insights for the new strategic period by presenting robust evidence of the Foundation's impact, relevance, and comparative advantage, while also identifying limitations that must be addressed to sustain and deepen impact in the next strategic period.

Innovation and flexibility have underpinned the strategic planning process in order to equip the Foundation with the tools to remain relevant and responsive to the dynamic landscape of civil society engagement. Subject to approval at the Board of Governors meeting in June 2026, we will formally launch the new strategic plan on 1 July 2026.



Minister for Justice of Fiji, Honourable Siromi Turaga with Ms Razmi Farook and Her Excellency Winnie Anna Kiap (left-right)

Insights from our Strategy Review Report

Health justice

The Foundation's engagement in the health sector is defined by a commitment to **inclusive and participatory health governance**, empowering civil society to bring their experiences and stories to policy-makers to achieve tangible change. By strengthening the capacity of the most vulnerable communities to advocate for better health outcomes, the Foundation has helped bridge the gap between national healthcare frameworks and the lived experiences of those experiencing health injustice and inequality. The impact of the past five years is a story of transition with citizens growing into active partners in building resilient, equitable, and community-led health systems in Commonwealth countries.

Independent evaluator statement:



'In India, Kenya, and Malawi, Foundation grants enabled civil society partners to document the experiences of transgender people, women in sex work, and people living on the streets with health access barriers, while empowering these groups to use the evidence in structured dialogues with district committees, hospital management, and ministries. As a result, concrete changes were introduced in local health protocols and service delivery [...] Across all three cases, frontline health providers and officials did not merely listen; they changed practices. These changes reflect a degree of institutional responsiveness that goes beyond symbolic consultation.'



Grant partner, **Civil Society Network on Climate Change**, leading a workshop on climate advocacy in Malawi

Climate justice

The Foundation continues to champion a **youth-led approach to climate justice**, recognising that those most affected by environmental degradation must shape responses to it, drawing a line between local resilience and major international legislative movements. By centring the perspectives of small and vulnerable states and marginalised groups, the Foundation has ensured that climate action is rooted in equity, cultural heritage, and the lived realities of Commonwealth citizens.

Independent evaluator statement:



'The Foundation's Critical Conversations and high-level roundtable dialogues at COP26 and COP27 provided platforms for civil society activists and legal experts to engage with policy-makers to explore just energy transitions and climate reparations. They confirmed that these conversations helped align civil society and government narratives and clarify the strategic value of the proposed international legal routes for SIDS, triggering a surge of international support and elevating the initiatives from niche legal strategies to widely recognised climate justice pathways.'

Insights from our Strategy Review Report

Freedom of expression

A vibrant Commonwealth relies on the **sanctity of the civic space**. The Foundation's work over the strategic period has focused on shielding voices, standing alongside journalists, artists, and activists, helping to push back against the tightening of expressive freedoms. By fostering platforms for open, inquisitive dialogue and creative debate, the Foundation has reinforced the vital principle that societies are only as strong as citizens' ability to speak, create, and challenge without fear.

Independent evaluator statement:



'Civic space monitoring by Civicus indicates that civil society is under severe attack in most countries and territories, with downgrades reflecting increased constraints on civic freedoms. Current data show that civic space is obstructed or severely repressed in nearly half of Commonwealth countries. Foundation funding enabled the Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum to develop a capacity-building framework and network that catalysed observable change in advocacy and media engagement, translating grassroots narratives from marginalised communities into influential policy inputs and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability.'



Grant partner, **Theatre for a Change**, supported women to advocate for their health rights in Malawi

Grants

The Foundation's grants are a **flagship programme for grassroots communities** across the Commonwealth. Over the past five years, a diverse portfolio has evolved that tells the story of transformative local agency. By providing flexible, responsive funding, the Foundation has empowered civil society organisations to turn community-led ideas into collective action. Foundation grants do more than fund projects: they build institutional resilience for the organisations that serve as the backbone of Commonwealth societies, enabling partners to mobilise citizens and advocate for positive change.

Independent evaluator statement:



'Unlike restrictive funding models, the Foundation's flexible, risk-tolerant and tailored funding support essentially removed financial, logistical and administrative barriers for small grassroots initiatives, enabling them to focus on organisational development, innovation, outreach, advocacy, and resource mobilisation. In many cases, these initiatives generated value well beyond the size of their grants. As such, the Foundation has contributed to expanding the pool of grassroots actors that are able to enter governance spaces, engage broader constituencies, and attract funding and public attention.'



Ntsika Kota from Eswatini finds out that he is the overall winner of the 2022 Commonwealth Short Story Prize



Commonwealth Short Story Prize

The Commonwealth Short Story Prize brings **new stories from emerging voices to an international audience**. Stories can warn us of what we stand to lose, transforming abstract concepts such as 'climate change' into tangible, emotional reality. Through the prize, the Foundation has empowered writers—particularly from small and vulnerable states—giving them a platform to simulate survival, navigate crises and imagine solutions. The prize nurtures unknown talent, shining a spotlight on creatives across the Commonwealth.

Independent evaluator statement:



'The Commonwealth Short Story Prize has proven to be a powerful mechanism for nurturing an inclusive literary landscape, amplifying underrepresented voices across the Commonwealth. Its strategic evolution has extended impact well beyond the small cohort of winners by strengthening participant writing skills and professional networks. Furthermore, it has enabled writers to gain greater visibility and inject local narratives and underrepresented themes into public discourse. Direct feedback from writers confirms that these efforts have led to tangible career breakthroughs, enhanced media engagement, and a richer cultural dialogue.'

Creativity for change

Culture and creativity provide vital lifelines for social progress. Over the past five years, the Foundation's creative programming has helped to **foster empathy and understanding through artistic expression**. It has amplified underrepresented voices to challenge ingrained stereotypes and build cross-border solidarity.

Independent evaluator statement:



'Creative and cultural initiatives supported by the Foundation developed spaces and platforms for local people and communities to come together to create art, express ideas and concerns, engage in dialogue, and gain visibility within their local social and cultural contexts. Evidence from across and beyond the case studies suggest that these spaces and platforms empower underrepresented people and communities (including women, youth, artists) by fostering relationships, shared purpose and identity, and confidence necessary for civic engagement in public discourse and governance.'

Building a Commonwealth of the People

Our Commonwealth, our future

The Foundation takes seriously its mission to advance the values and principles of the Commonwealth, as well as our obligation to help strengthen the institution itself.

At the time of reporting in 2026, the Commonwealth stands at a pivotal moment in its history. Many—especially the Commonwealth's **1.5 billion young people**, whose attitudes will define its future—are rightly questioning whether the Commonwealth is equipped to address today's global challenges: threats to democracy, peace, and the health of our planet.

The Foundation has sought to foster meaningful debate on the Commonwealth's purpose—ensuring that citizens' voices help shape a Commonwealth fit for our challenging and complex world.



Award-winning Kenyan journalist Victoria Rubadiri hosted the mini-series *A Commonwealth of the People*?

'The conversation and exchanges were candid, energetic, interesting, insightful.'

Jacqueline Wong, Malaysia (participant)

A Commonwealth for the future

The future of the Commonwealth has been a recurrent theme of our work, guiding key events and driving the focus of the **Commonwealth People's Forum** in both 2022 and 2024. In 2021, a series of events commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Eminent Persons Group landmark report, *A Commonwealth of the People? Time for Urgent Reform*, reached over **300,000 viewers**. The three-part mini-series brought together authors of the report with former leaders of Commonwealth Member States and young Commonwealth leaders to explore the Commonwealth's relevance in the modern world.

In 2022, we marked the tenth anniversary of the **Commonwealth Charter** with a high-impact multimedia campaign that reached over **600,000 people** on social media. Thousands of individuals co-signed the Charter, and hundreds recorded videos sharing their vision for the Commonwealth's future. The campaign culminated in two *Critical Conversations* during Commonwealth Week. The first—**A Decade of the Commonwealth Charter: Young Leaders' Dialogue**—brought together over **700 young people** from nearly every Member State. The second, held in partnership with the High Commission of South Africa in London, was an intergenerational event that posed the question **'Where to now?'** to those who have a perspective on the Commonwealth's past and those who have a stake in its future. Contributions from current and former Commonwealth Secretaries-General, aired during this live event, underscored the enduring significance of the Charter—and of the broader Commonwealth project.

Commonwealth leadership

In September 2024, the Foundation hosted a debate for the three candidates seeking election to the position of **Commonwealth Secretary-General**, a practice we first established at CHOGM 2015. Moderated by broadcast journalist Zeinab Badawi, the event drew a capacity crowd to Chatham House and attracted **1,600 live viewers online**, a record for a Chatham House event.

Ahead of the debate, the Foundation invited Commonwealth civil society to share their voices and visions for future leadership. The 1,300 responses we received helped us curate an event that focused squarely on issues that matter most to the people of the Commonwealth. Strategic partnerships with **Reuters** and **The Guardian** ensured global media coverage and amplified candidates' responses to the priorities highlighted by civil society. The responses continued to be referenced in media coverage of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa the following month, and so the Director-General invited the candidates to respond again in writing to substantiate and clarify their answers to the most pressing questions from civil society. The interview transcripts were published on the Foundation's website and widely shared, and the answers from the successful candidate, **Hon. Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey**, were further amplified following her appointment in October 2024.

The Foundation is proud to have established a tradition of ensuring that Commonwealth citizens have a direct stake in the leadership and future direction of the Commonwealth. We commit to taking this initiative forward as part of our broader goal of strengthening the connection between Commonwealth leadership and its people.

Zeinab Badawi hosting the 2024 debate for the position of Commonwealth Secretary-General with (left-right) H.E. Mamadou Tangara, Joshua Phoho Setipa and Hon. Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey at Chatham House, London



Results 2021–2026

56

Tens of thousands of citizens from all 56 Commonwealth countries have participated live in our events to discuss and debate the future of the Commonwealth.

6.88 million

The number of times our videos exploring Commonwealth values and principles have been viewed online during the strategic period.

Connecting communities

Over the past five years, the Foundation has significantly expanded and diversified its reach—ensuring that people from all backgrounds and regions feel part of the conversation on the Commonwealth: its priorities and its future.



Rene Holder-McClean-Ramirez (left), attending the 2024 People’s Forum after becoming an active member of our online community

Through a series of strategic efforts, including our *Critical Conversations* event series, a steadily-growing and well-informed mailing list now surpassing **150,000 subscribers**, and vibrant social media channels with notable surges in engagement due to careful and effective use of online advertising, we have built and connected a dynamic community across the Commonwealth.

From the outset, we recognised the need for both digital and in-person spaces where citizens, civil society organisations, and government stakeholders can exchange ideas. Our *Critical Conversations* format has proven indispensable, convening experts, policy-makers and frontline practitioners around pressing issues—from climate justice to public health—and inviting them to develop shared solutions in real-time. We harness these contributions, alongside opinion surveys of our wider audience, to ensure the voice of civil society informs Commonwealth ministerial meetings, Heads of Government meetings, and other multilateral processes. The online community that has emerged from this initiative is active and flourishing.

Many individuals and organisations engage first through a public webinar or social media post, then gradually deepen their participation in the Foundation’s ecosystem, climbing a ladder of engagement that, at each stage, presents new and evolving opportunities.

‘From the outset, we recognised the need for both digital and in-person spaces where citizens, civil society organisations, and government stakeholders can exchange ideas.’

For instance, **Rene Holder-McClean-Ramirez** from **Barbados**, an active member of our online community, began by attending an online event to celebrate Commonwealth Day in 2023 before participating in a social media campaign that highlighted the power and importance of the Commonwealth Charter. Encouraged by the welcoming online environment, Rene later joined a group of activists at a civil society virtual roundtable for the Caribbean region, before attending the Commonwealth People’s Forum in Samoa in person and contributing directly to the Forum outcome video.

Or consider the journey of **Abi Begho**, Director of Lake Health and Wellbeing in **Saint Christopher and Nevis**. Abi first heard about the Foundation after looking for grants opportunities online and visiting our website. Her organisation initially applied to the Foundation’s open grants call in 2021, before being invited to participate in a capacity strengthening grant. In the meantime, Abi joined our mailing list and attended numerous online events, including our Regional Consultation for the Americas and the Caribbean in advance of the 2024 People’s Forum in Samoa.

Abi’s sustained engagement led to an invitation to speak at the People’s Forum to share her considerable success in raising government awareness of non-communicable diseases. At the Forum, Abi met Dr Stellah Bosire from Kenya, who shared similar experiences in delivering projects on women’s health. They connected online several times after the forum and developed a joint project proposal, which they submitted as a grant application to Pivotal Ventures (Melinda French Gates’ foundation) in early 2025.

These stories underscore the Foundation’s core mission: to amplify the voices and aspirations of citizens and place them at the heart of debate and action. By nurturing strong, accessible platforms that bring citizens together and enable them to collaborate, we continue to forge a Commonwealth that truly belongs to its people.

‘Many individuals and organisations engage first through a public webinar or social media post, then gradually deepen their participation in the Foundation’s ecosystem, climbing a ladder of engagement that, at each stage, presents new and evolving opportunities.’



1,450

The average number of subscribers who join our mailing lists every month.

2x

Our mailing list has more than 2x the number of subscribers than in 2021.

On average, our social media posts attract over 2x the number of comments, likes and shares as compared to the previous strategic period.

There were over 2x as many applications to our open grants call in 2025 than in 2021.

Bringing the voice of civil society into policy spaces

The Foundation has demonstrated its ability to enhance the relevance and impact of Commonwealth ministerial meetings by introducing informed perspectives from civil society that help shape more effective policy.

Throughout the reporting period, we have taken a highly strategic approach to this work—laying the groundwork for contributions that are valued by Member States and reflected in official outcomes.

Our *Critical Conversations* event series has been central to this strategy—creating carefully curated roundtables that bring together hundreds of informed Commonwealth citizens to craft policy recommendations delivered directly to Commonwealth Ministers. Over the past five years, the nature and level of our engagement with Commonwealth ministerial processes has changed dramatically: we have brought in the voices of more civil society representatives, from more regions and countries of the Commonwealth than ever before. And we have delivered valuable and valued policy input through innovative use of online, video and print media.

In 2023, for example, our roundtable on **Gender, Climate Change, and Health: How Can We Do Better for Women and Girls?** gathered civil society experts

to develop a set of practical recommendations focused on the gendered aspects of climate and health. These were presented directly to the **Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting** in The Bahamas in print and a companion video, where they earned a groundbreaking endorsement in the official communiqué.

Another milestone in 2023 was our roundtable on **Global Finance for People and Planet**. For the first time, insights from civil society directly informed background papers for the **Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting** in Morocco—setting a precedent for deeper civil society influence on global economic policy.

Our engagement with the **Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting** has also gained momentum. In 2023, we worked closely with high-level civil society leaders to deliver a carefully crafted set of recommendations to Health Ministers. The following year, civil society experts were invited to update ministers on progress against those recommendations,

including a focused assessment of the health challenges faced by Commonwealth countries, particularly small and vulnerable states. Our subsequent involvement in May 2025 marked three years of sustained and strategic engagement with this key Commonwealth policy forum.

Our work on **climate justice** has also advanced at the global level. At the **2022 UN Climate Change Conference (COP27)**, for example, we convened several high-level events involving Heads of State and civil society—contributions that key informants have linked to the establishment of the loss and damage facility (see case study on page 40). In 2024, we hosted a side-event at the **4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4)** in Antigua and Barbuda. Opened by the Prime Minister of Samoa, the event provided valuable insights on building resilient health systems in small island states that were carried forward to the **People's Forum 2024** in Samoa.

In 2025, our roundtable on **Holding Power To Account: Climate Justice In The Wake Of The International Court Of Justice Advisory Opinion** formed part of our ongoing engagement with the landmark ICJ advisory opinion process. Outputs from the event were widely seen and shared by those attending COP30 in Brazil.

Another landmark event in 2025 was our roundtable **Together We Thrive: Culture and Creativity in Advocacy Across the Commonwealth** which explored

‘Over the past five years [...] we have brought in the voices of more civil society representatives, from more regions and countries of the Commonwealth than ever before.’

the transformative role of creative advocacy in driving social and political change. By weaving artistic performances into the panel discussion, we ensured that creative expression was a central part of a conversation that involved more than 1,600 participants.

Looking ahead, the Foundation will continue to fulfil its commitment to bringing the voice of Commonwealth civil society into spaces where policies are being formulated—and decisions taken—that affect their lives. Discussions with the Secretary-General to formalise our role in Commonwealth ministerial spaces are ongoing, and we are confident that Member States will recognise the value of this crucial dimension of the Foundation's mandate.



Elizabeth Wathuti speaking at the high-level COP27 dialogue, 'Climate justice through international law', alongside (L-R) The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC, H.E. Nikenike Vurobaravu, The Rt Hon Philip Davis and the Hon Surangel Whipps Jr., Egypt © Resilience Hub

Results 2021–2026

3,514

The number of citizens—from all 56 Commonwealth countries—that directly contributed ideas to policy recommendations which we later presented to governments.

Over 50%

The proportion of our event speakers—85 of a total of 161—that hail from the Commonwealth's Small Island and Vulnerable States.

6

The number of Heads of Government who spoke at our events during the strategic period.

Case study

Leveraging our convening power: Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers acknowledge civil society demands and agree to act

Key result:



Partner capacity



Civil society voice



Policy-maker responsiveness



Policy change

Independent evaluator statement:

‘The Commonwealth Foundation played a critical role in ensuring that civil society voices, particularly those from small island states and grassroots organisations, were heard at the 2023 Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting (WAMM) in Nassau, The Bahamas. Through its pre-Ministerial *Critical Conversation* roundtable, the Foundation facilitated a robust exchange of ideas, the outcomes of which shaped Ministerial discussions and led to concrete commitments in the official WAMM communiqué.’

‘What the Foundation does so well is boil down language into something that is useful for Ministers to take away. The recommendations really resonated with Ministers.’

Jennifer Namgyal, Head of Gender Section, Commonwealth Secretariat.



Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO presenting Key Asks from civil society at the 2023 Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting, The Bahamas © Commonwealth Secretariat

Grassroots civil society organisations face persistent challenges in accessing high-level decision-making spaces—particularly in small and vulnerable states where limited financial resources and climate impacts intersect with gender inequality. Women’s organisations working at the nexus of climate resilience, economic empowerment, and health justice are often excluded from meaningful engagement with government agendas. These entrenched barriers were further deepened by the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a disproportionate impact on women and girls across the Commonwealth.

To address these gaps, the Commonwealth Foundation convened a *Critical Conversations* roundtable in August 2023, titled ‘Gender, Climate Change, and Health: How Can We Do Better for Women and Girls?’. Moderated by Caribbean broadcast journalist Alison Kentish, the roundtable brought together over 400 participants—including gender experts, grassroots leaders, youth activists, and advocacy organisations from across the Commonwealth, with strong participation from small island states. The space enabled civil society to share experiences and generate practical, people-centred policy

 1 August 2023	 23 August 2023	 25 August 2023
Online roundtable on gender, climate, and health with over 400 participants. Civil society recommendations are distilled into a policy brief and video.	Foundation presents civil society insights directly to Ministers at the Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting.	WAMM communiqué endorses civil society priorities, including women-led health programmes and gender-responsive climate policy.

recommendations. These addressed urgent concerns such as gaps in maternal healthcare, the economic fragility of women-led groups, and the need for gender-responsive investments in climate adaptation.

The Foundation ensured that civil society voices from the roundtable were effectively channelled to decision-makers. Insights from the forum were synthesised into a policy brief and a short video, both of which were presented at the 2023 Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting by the Foundation’s Director-General, Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO, and journalist Alison Kentish. By translating complex issues into accessible formats, the Foundation helped civil society deliver well-structured, solutions-oriented recommendations directly to ministers and senior officials.

The Foundation’s approach demonstrated an effective model for enabling civil society access to policy spaces. Ministers acknowledged the value of the presentation in shaping their understanding of intersecting issues—particularly the long-term gendered impacts of climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. Several civil society recommendations were echoed in the WAMM communiqué, including commitments to invest in women-led community health initiatives and to systematically integrate gender considerations into climate adaptation planning. The Commonwealth Secretariat’s Gender Section further signalled its intention to incorporate these recommendations into future programming.

By creating space for dialogue, building legitimacy for civil society contributions, and ensuring ministerial engagement with these insights, the Foundation strengthened civil society’s voice in governance processes. However, challenges remain, including limited civil society presence at ministerial meetings, digital access barriers, and the need for dedicated capacity-strengthening support—particularly in small island states experiencing declining aid flows.

‘By creating space for dialogue, building legitimacy for civil society contributions, and ensuring ministerial engagement with these insights, the Foundation strengthened civil society’s voice in governance processes.’

Several key lessons emerged from this work. The Foundation’s convening role is most effective when paired with support for actionable, inclusive recommendations. Future engagement could be strengthened by improving regional reach, addressing structural barriers to participation, and ensuring greater visibility for issues such as disability inclusion and youth representation. While important progress was made in amplifying women’s voices, much is required to embed gender equality, climate justice, and health equity in long-term policy action.

A gender equality activist in Bangladesh © UN Women



Read the full report [here:](#)



CHOGM and the People's Forum

The Commonwealth People's Forum is the largest platform for civil society to engage directly with Commonwealth leaders on the most pressing issues of our time. The Forum is organised every two years alongside the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) as a joint initiative of the Foundation and the Host Government. The Foundation also convenes the roundtable dialogue between civil society and Foreign Ministers. CHOGM took place twice during the reporting period, and we are currently preparing for CHOGM 2026.

CHOGM 2022: Rwanda

The 2022 People's Forum set itself the ambitious task of addressing some of the biggest questions of our age: How do we harness the forces of compassion, equality, and justice to protect our planet and advance a more inclusive future? And what role could—or should—the Commonwealth play in building that future?

With the benefit of a longer lead time, the Foundation, alongside the Rwanda Governance Board, crafted a focused programme around the themes of health, climate, and freedom of expression. Our *Critical Conversations* series proved to be a game-changer, giving us the confidence and experience to shape dynamic formats and expand our network of activists and leaders across all Commonwealth regions.



Dr James Hospedales and Alisi Rabukawaqa speaking at the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) in Antigua and Barbuda

CHOGM 2024: Samoa

The 2024 People's Forum built on the momentum harnessed from Rwanda, with a sharp focus on climate justice, health justice, and freedom of expression—bringing to the fore the experiences of women, young people, and small and vulnerable states. The programme emerged from an intense preparatory process ('The Path to Samoa'), which included national and online consultations with thousands of Commonwealth citizens from all 56 Commonwealth countries, as well as a special side event held at the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) in partnership with the Government of Samoa. Insights from this process were distilled into a printed brief with a companion video that was shared with Member States: *What do the People of the Commonwealth need in 2024?*

Held over two days in October 2024, the Forum was opened by the Prime Minister of Samoa, whose compelling address made clear that the priorities of the incoming Chair in Office align closely with those of the Foundation. More than 50 speakers and creative performers contributed to an event that drew capacity crowds, including many national government delegates. For the first time, the Forum was fully livestreamed—allowing thousands of citizens to engage directly and extending the conversation far beyond the conference venue.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with participants praising the high calibre of speakers and moderators; well-structured sessions that balanced focus with depth; effective integration of creative elements into the programme; and strong representation of small and vulnerable states.

A video showcasing the major outcomes of the People's Forum has been shared with governors and widely disseminated throughout our networks.

Foreign Ministers Roundtable

The roundtable between Foreign Ministers and civil society traditionally takes place on the Saturday of CHOGM week while leaders are on retreat. Chaired by the Foundation's Director-General, the events in 2022 and 2024 focused on the Forum's key themes—climate justice, health justice, and freedom of expression—alongside the broader identity and future of the Commonwealth.

The Foundation prepared carefully to ensure diverse civil society representation and a wide range of questions. Ministers and officials were given ample opportunity to engage and respond, creating a respectful and open dialogue, even on sensitive issues. Feedback highlighted the inclusiveness of the format and the parity of engagement between civil society and government.

Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministers Meeting

The Foundation is formally invited to present at the Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministers Meeting (CFAMM) every two years on the sidelines of CHOGM—a crucial opportunity to showcase our work and present the outcomes of the People's Forum. This happened successfully in 2022; however, due to a timing issue in 2024, the Foundation's Chair of the Board of Governors and Director-General were required to deliver shortened remarks. The Foundation will seek to ensure that this experience is not repeated at CHOGM 2026 and looks to its governors for support and guidance in reinforcing the importance of this engagement.

CHOGM 2026: Antigua and Barbuda

Preparations for the 2026 People's Forum commenced with the launch of the 'Path to Antigua and Barbuda' in November 2025, which featured the publication of a new poem by the Commonwealth Poet Laureate on *adda*, 'Five Fingers, One Hand'. Strong relationships have been established through the Content Design Committee which brings together the Foundation, the host country, and civil society representatives from all five Commonwealth regions, to shape a compelling and dynamic programme. As part of our commitment to learning and growth, we have carefully tracked many lessons from Rwanda and Samoa. Our 'Green Book'—which guides our work for the People's Forum, the Foreign Ministers roundtable, and other CHOGM-related responsibilities—has been revised and strengthened to sustain momentum and to ensure a strong and impactful People's Forum in 2026.

Results 2021–2026

7,532

The number of people who tuned in live to watch the People's Forum in 2022 and 2024.

45

The number of civil society representatives who featured in the 2022 and 2024 Forum outcome videos which were later presented to governments.

334,472

The number of times the Forum outcome videos have been viewed online.

Dancers at the launch of 'How To Make A Commonwealth Quilt', announced in anticipation of the 2026 People's Forum



Health justice

At the Commonwealth Foundation, we recognise that the health systems of many Commonwealth countries are already struggling and are unprepared for the complex, health-related threats that arise from climate change, conflict, and increased migration—and indeed the next pandemic.

We also understand that the smallest states face the greatest risk of being overwhelmed by rising health costs. Across the Commonwealth, it is the citizens already vulnerable due to discrimination, stigmatisation, and poverty—or because they are living with non-communicable diseases, mental health conditions, and other comorbidities—that are bearing the heaviest burden.



Participant at the 2023 dialogue between civil society and Senior Health Officials, Switzerland

‘When entire communities, or even entire countries, are unable to access essential health services, including prevention and crisis response, we are failing to protect and uphold the right to health.’

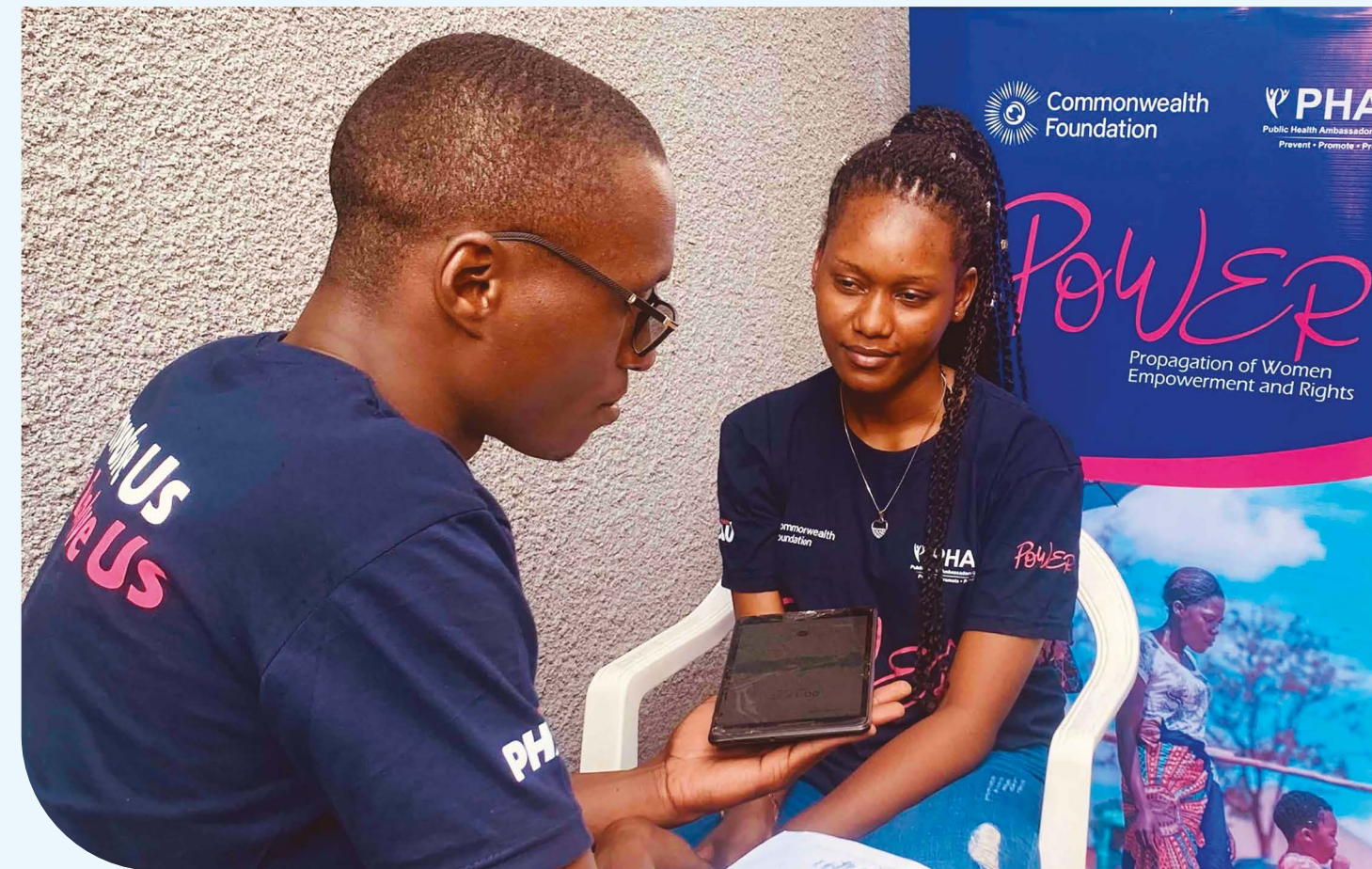
Our focus on health justice reflects the reality that health inequalities across the Commonwealth are too often caused or exacerbated by laws, policies, and institutions that fail individuals and communities. By recognising the social determinants of health and the structural barriers that prevent access to adequate and appropriate care, health justice highlights both the obligation of governments to provide for their people and the power of individuals and communities to drive change.

This area of work aligns closely with the direction of the 2022 and 2024 CHOGM Communiqués, the core principles of the Commonwealth Charter, and key elements of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Civil society has consistently affirmed health justice as a major priority for the people of the Commonwealth.

Our approach is anchored in the global commitment to Universal Health Coverage (UHC): the principle that everyone, everywhere, should have access to the healthcare they need without financial hardship. We recognise the need to focus on the countries, communities, and individuals most at risk—those who face systemic barriers to care.

We have embedded health justice into our grant-making, supporting civil society organisations to influence more inclusive and equitable health policy and practice. We have built strong links with the Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting (CHMM) and are using our platforms to position civil society at the centre of efforts to address health inequalities. Across our work, we are also responding to the deep connections between health justice and climate justice.

Grant partner, Public Health Ambassadors Uganda, monitoring their project in Luwero District, Central Uganda



Impact and change enabled by our grants

Through targeted grant support, the Commonwealth Foundation has enabled significant shifts towards inclusive and equitable healthcare across the Commonwealth, with particular attention to vulnerable groups and communities that are too often overlooked.

In Kenya, **Sense International** made real progress integrating sensory screening and early intervention services for children with complex disabilities, such as deaf-blindness, into county-level policy in Garissa and Kwale counties. With Foundation backing, these services were formally incorporated into county development plans and formally adopted as legal frameworks in 2023, securing sustainable funding and expanding critical health access.

In Uganda, our partnership with the **Uganda Cancer Society** raised awareness of cancer prevention, treatment and the importance of adopting and implementing Uganda's National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP). In 2023, the Uganda Cancer Institute Board of Directors adopted the draft UNCCP which is now under review by the Ministry of Health. The grant also contributed to the approval of a supplementary budget of more than GBP £6,000,000 for advanced diagnostic equipment and further funding commitments for cancer-related services.

Public Health Ambassadors Uganda significantly improved access to sexual and reproductive health services in Luwero District, Central Uganda. Young women and adolescent girls were empowered to actively participate in district health committees and advocate for their health rights, directly increasing local HIV counselling and testing by 20%.

Meanwhile, the **Women Promotion Centre** in Kenya tackled the stigma surrounding mental health among women and girls. Empowering young women to advocate for their mental health rights increased the number seeking mental health services by 15%, highlighting the power of community-led advocacy in overcoming social barriers to healthcare access.

Collectively, these initiatives underscore a cohesive narrative of systemic change, demonstrating how targeted advocacy and empowered community voices can lead to inclusive, equitable healthcare solutions across diverse Commonwealth contexts.

The sample of grants explored in this report is limited to projects that have been completed and assessed. The majority are from the cohort approved by the Grants Committee in 2021. Additional significant results from this sample are presented in the case study on page 32.

Bringing the voice of civil society into health policy spaces

Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting

In May 2023, the Foundation convened two events and conducted an online survey to bring civil society experience and expertise into efforts to realign UHC as a policy priority within the Commonwealth. An online *Critical Conversations* roundtable, **Advancing Universal Health Coverage through Gender Equality**, brought together over 200 health policy experts, practitioners, and civil society leaders from 39 countries, selected from more than 900 applicants based on their expertise in the intersections between health and gender policy. The event culminated in the development of 12 Key Asks from Civil Society, which were presented to the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health (CACH) and discussed at a dialogue with Senior Health Officials, earning an endorsement in the final Communique.

In 2024, the Foundation followed up with 25 civil society experts to assess progress against the 2023 Key Asks, producing a policy statement that highlighted ongoing challenges and proposed actionable solutions, with a particular focus on small and vulnerable states.

Our contribution in 2025 was shaped by an inquiry conducted by the Foundation among health sector practitioners and advocates to consider how Commonwealth countries can build more resilient health systems against a backdrop of economic instability and geopolitical uncertainty. Outcomes from this inquiry, which built on our previous work, were presented to CHMM in May, 2025.

The Foundation participated in the inaugural **Commonwealth Health Coordination Forum** in May 2026, providing a platform for senior health officials and partners to maintain momentum on priority health issues between ministerial meetings. Building on previous engagements in health policy spaces, we facilitated a civil society presence within this evolving forum which this year had a focus on the growing burden of non-communicable diseases, particularly among small and vulnerable states.

Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting

In August 2023, our *Critical Conversations* roundtable, **Gender, Climate Change, and Health: How Can We Do Better for Women and Girls?** convened 450 civil society experts and advocates to examine the intersection of climate change and health through a gender lens—exploring its specific impact on women and girls. The roundtable resulted in ten practical recommendations, which were presented to the Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting in The Bahamas and later endorsed in the official communiqué.

Our commitment to UHC has been strengthened through our partnership with the UHC2030 Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (CSEM). In 2024, we invited members of the CSEM Advisory Group to participate in *Critical Conversations* panels and other dialogues, facilitating the exchange of insights across countries and sectors.



Dr Justin Koonin and Waiswa Nkwanga at the 2023 Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting

Responding to the pandemic

In 2020, the Foundation’s Board of Governors approved a special grants call to support Commonwealth civil society organisations responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. On an exceptional basis, the call was opened to all Commonwealth countries, including those not yet Foundation members. With additional funding from the Government of Canada, the Foundation supported the vital work of 26 organisations in 16 countries, for projects that were largely implemented during the reporting period.

We worked closely with partners to capture and analyse results of these initiatives. These insights—gathered through reports and a learning exchange with 14 grant partners—have informed our broader work on health justice and civil society participation.



Our grant partner, The Centre for Civil Society, successfully lobbied for working capital loans for street vendors in India who were struggling financially due to the pandemic

The impact of our Covid-19 grants:

- 1. Identifying gaps in Covid-19 policy and practice**
Grant partners identified gaps in local and national pandemic responses caused by the exclusion of marginalised and vulnerable groups. They created platforms to amplify the voices of these communities, leading to more inclusive and tailored policies. **Community Development Alliance** in Ghana helped prompt a parliamentary investigation into vaccine procurement. In India, **Centre for Civil Society** successfully lobbied for working capital loans for street vendors, many of whom are women.
- 2. Strengthening gendered responses to Covid-19 and future health crises**
Several partners addressed the gendered impacts of the pandemic, improving access to social security and enabling women’s groups to coordinate more effective multi-agency responses. In Saint Christopher and Nevis, **Lake Health and Wellbeing** influenced amendments to the National Gender Policy. In Uganda, the **Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute** (SEATINI) secured commitments to reform small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) support, addressing accessibility for women.
- 3. Improved access to social security and increased resilience to future shocks**
In Malaysia, 153 communities—supported by **Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas**—delivered critical information and assistance to vulnerable households. In South Africa, **The Black Sash Trust** advocated for basic income support beyond the pandemic.
- 4. Enhanced collaboration and coordination between government and civil society in healthcare provision**
This was the most-common result achieved by the projects, observed in 22 out of 26 grants. **Dialogue Fiji** helped build alliances with the Ministry of Health, religious leaders, and community groups to increase vaccine uptake, community trust and Covid-19 safety awareness.
- 5. Improved access to information, knowledge, and practice on Covid-19 prevention**
Coalitions formed in Malaysia and Malawi became trusted sources of guidance on Covid-19 measures and government relief schemes, building capacity for future emergencies.

Health justice: what we have learned

The Foundation has carried forward the lessons learned through our Covid-19 grants. In March 2022, our *Critical Conversation, Towards Equitable Access to Vaccines, Medicines and Technology*, brought together health experts, policy-makers, and activists to examine the legal and regulatory barriers that obstruct access to essential medicines and technology in many Commonwealth countries.

Other important lessons from the experience of delivering grants support during the Covid-19 pandemic are reflected in our approach to grant-making throughout the 2021–2026 strategy:

- **Anticipate governance risks:** Civic space was severely constrained during the pandemic and engagement with governments was constrained. Future projects must factor in these risks.
- **Build in budget flexibility:** Economic volatility impacted partners' ability to plan and budget effectively. With support from the Grants Committee we were able to provide additional flexibility and that was critical, though flexibility must always be balanced with our obligation to ensure accountability for public funds.
- **The value of in-person engagement:** Remote learning platforms were adopted quickly and used effectively, but the absence of face-to-face interaction between partners limited opportunities for organic learning and mentorship.
- **Plan for measurement constraints:** Monitoring and documenting results proved especially challenging given the small organisations being supported and the difficult operating environment brought about by the pandemic. Recognising these limitations from the outset would have set more realistic expectations.

The overall lessons from our work on health justice

'Partner-led advocacy presented during *Critical Conversations* and beyond show that placing gender at the centre of health reform improves outcomes.'

'Economic volatility impacted partners' ability to plan and budget effectively.'

during the reporting period are:

- **Civil society shifts systems:** Across our programming—from grants to global dialogues—civil society has consistently demonstrated its ability to expose critical gaps and mobilise inclusive health policy reform. In Uganda, for instance, the Cancer Society's work prompted policy commitments and direct budget allocations to cancer services.
- **Gender must be centred:** Partner-led advocacy presented during *Critical Conversations* and beyond show that placing gender at the centre of health reform improves outcomes. From street vendor protections in India to gender-sensitive health policy in Saint Christopher and Nevis, change accelerates when women and girls shape the agenda.
- **Tailored support for small states works:** Partnerships with civil society in small and vulnerable states such as Fiji and The Bahamas revealed unique capacity constraints. Programmes designed with these realities in mind—from policy surveys to ministerial briefings—led to stronger uptake and responsiveness. In these small states, even relatively small interventions yielded significant results.
- **Dialogue can be catalytic:** Engagement at the Commonwealth Health Ministers Meetings helped transform civil society insight into policy influence. Civil society 'Key Asks' on UHC and health equity—drawn from 39 countries—were presented directly to officials and influenced the discussion and final communique.
- **Health justice is intersectional:** Work at the nexus of climate, gender, and health—especially at the 2023 Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting—revealed the need for multisectoral thinking. Addressing one dimension of exclusion often unlocks progress in others.

Our work on health justice has reinforced the importance of civil society as a driver of change in health policy and practice. By creating spaces where civil society can engage with policy-makers and shape decisions, the Foundation has helped to amplify the voices of those most affected by health inequalities. As we move forward with our commitment to advancing health justice, we will ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of universal health coverage and equitable health outcomes.

Results 2021–2026

463

The number of civil society organisations who attended health-focused networking events funded by our grants.

67

The number of policy engagements that took place as part of our grants projects, attended by 502 decision-makers and 688 community members.

7,000

The estimated number of people reached as a result of the 29 radio shows, 32 press articles and 92 awareness-raising events that were delivered through our grants projects.

The results above are drawn from a limited sample of grants that have been completed and assessed so far under the strategy. The majority of these results are from the first cohort approved by the Grants Committee in 2021.

Looking ahead

To deepen impact, the Foundation should consider expanding direct engagement with health ministries and regional bodies, ensuring civil society perspectives inform national and intergovernmental health commitments.

Prioritising work in small and vulnerable states is important, and would build on the Foundation's strong record of leveraging modest investments to achieve tangible impact. Opportunities lie in enhancing our capacity to track the influence of civil society on health policy, experimenting with new creative platforms to communicate health justice issues, and supporting stronger South–South learning exchanges.

Lab technician in rural government health clinic in Uganda
© ILO (CC BY-NC-ND)



Case study

More inclusive health systems in India, Kenya and Malawi

Key result:

-  Partner capacity
-  Civil society voice
-  Policy-maker responsiveness
-  Policy change

Independent evaluator statement:



‘The available evidence indicates that the Commonwealth Foundation-supported initiatives have significantly expanded health services for marginalised groups in local districts of India, Kenya, and Malawi. By combining strategic advocacy, robust partnerships, and grassroots leadership, these projects have overcome entrenched barriers to care and shifted local healthcare practices toward a more inclusive model. Lessons from these initiatives underscore the potential for long-term policy reform.’

In India, the Best Practices Foundation worked with LGBTQ+ individuals and female sex workers in Karnataka—communities whose access to health services declined during the pandemic. The project supported participants to understand and assert their healthcare entitlements under legal frameworks such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2019) and the Karnataka State Policy on Transgender Persons (2017). Local health providers were also trained to address stigma and identity-based discrimination. This dual approach helped close the gap between policy and practice. Participants began filing formal complaints about service shortfalls, prompting clinics to make practical improvements—including better queue management and the establishment of a transgender ward. Over 80% of trainees submitted Right to Information (RTI) requests related to healthcare grievances, marking a significant step forward in community agency and institutional responsiveness.

In Kenya, the Undugu Society supported persons living and working on the streets who face persistent barriers to care—despite guarantees in the Kenya Health Policy (2014–2030). The project trained 110 health advocacy champions and worked with Nairobi county officials to address long-standing challenges such as medicine shortages, lack of identification documents, and limited outreach services. Initial data showed that only 10% of the targeted population had access to healthcare. Following project implementation, access increased to 80%. Ten public hospitals launched tailored outreach programmes for street populations and improved the availability of essential medicines. By aligning this work with constitutional healthcare rights, the project showed that incremental administrative reforms—such as relaxing ID requirements—can improve service delivery and support meaningful economic reintegration.

In Malawi, Theatre for a Change addressed the disconnect between strong national policies on HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the daily experiences of women and gender-diverse people in sex work. Despite a policy environment that promotes comprehensive SRHR, unintended pregnancies, and unsafe abortions are common, and HIV rates are persistently high



A workshop on healthcare entitlements, organised by grant partner, Best Practices Foundation in Karnataka, India

 2022, India	 2023, Kenya	 2023, Malawi	 2024, Malawi
Training and advocacy led to creation of a dedicated transgender ward in Shimoga district hospital.	Ten Nairobi hospitals launched outreach programmes to ensure a more reliable supply of essential medicines for street populations.	Hospital ombudsmen introduced, new Sexual and Reproductive Health Services guidance displayed in clinics to reduce discrimination.	Ministry of Health in Malawi committed to national rollout of inclusive sexual health service guidelines.

‘They have started engaging in economic activities that improve their income, so they can feed themselves and their families.’

Grants partner (independent interview)

(currently 55%). The project used interactive theatre to highlight discrimination in healthcare settings and support change. Eighteen women in sex work were trained to share personal experiences with healthcare providers across six structured dialogue sessions. These conversations led to measurable shifts in provider attitudes and resulted in the development of new guidelines promoting non-judgmental services, which were displayed in local health centres. Hospital ombudsmen began supporting service users to file complaints, and the Ministry of Health has pledged a nationwide expansion of the guidelines.

With Foundation support, these projects have delivered practical change. Grants enabled data collection that quantified systemic issues—such as medicine shortages and documentation barriers—and supported community-led action. Partners fostered dialogue between affected communities and decision-makers, and built the skills and confidence of marginalised people to report violations, navigate complaints processes, and advocate for their healthcare rights. These interventions sparked reforms ranging from clinic-level changes to national policy commitments. Long-term progress will depend on embedding inclusive practices into standard operating procedures, training materials, and institutional guidelines. With strategic investment, community leadership, and effective use of legal mandates, these initiatives show that small-scale projects can drive meaningful progress towards Universal Health Coverage for those most often left behind.

‘Now the community feels more confident to go to the clinics, and the hospital staff are more understanding of who they are. It has significantly improved access.’

Key stakeholder (independent interview)

Hospital staff in Nairobi engaging with the public to support access to healthcare, facilitated by grant partner, Undugu Society



‘We trained the community members on how to go about advocacy efforts. We built a district committee of eight members, and they could actually bring in changes—they could advocate for their rights.’

Grants partner (independent interview)

Read the full report [here:](#)



Climate justice

At the Commonwealth Foundation, we recognise that the worst effects of climate change are falling disproportionately on the Commonwealth's smallest and most vulnerable states—those least responsible for the crisis. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation are threatening lives, livelihoods, and entire communities. The concept of climate justice acknowledges this profound inequity and calls for appropriate and proportionate responses that reflect existing vulnerabilities, resources, and capabilities.

Women and girls across the Commonwealth are particularly exposed to the impacts of climate change due to unequal access to resources, land ownership, and decision-making power. Our cross-cutting commitment to gender equality is central to our work on climate justice, ensuring that women's voices and experiences are integrated into climate policy and action.

This focus aligns with key Commonwealth and global commitments, including the Paris Agreement, the Commonwealth Charter, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Civil society has consistently identified climate justice as a major priority, especially for small island developing states and other vulnerable Commonwealth countries.



Grant partner, Badabon Sangho influenced climate policy and improved conditions for women fisherfolk

Our approach to climate justice is grounded in the recognition that civil society plays a critical role in driving meaningful and lasting change. Our grant-making on climate justice has supported innovative projects that influence policy formation and decision-making, including through creative means. We have also facilitated civil society engagement in key multilateral processes, recognising the vital role of grassroots voices in holding governments to account and shaping fairer outcomes.

‘Women and girls across the Commonwealth are particularly exposed to the impacts of climate change due to unequal access to resources, land ownership, and decision-making power.’

Young women participating in citizen journalism on climate justice in Pakistan, facilitated by grant partner Sustainable Social Development Organisation



Impact and change enabled by our grants

Our grants partners have been at the forefront of advancing climate justice, enabling Commonwealth civil society to play a pivotal role in shaping policies, protecting ecosystems, and empowering vulnerable communities. Across diverse contexts, these initiatives have collectively influenced systemic change, underscoring the interconnected nature of environmental advocacy and social equity.

In Bangladesh, **Badabon Sangho** elevated the visibility and rights of women fisherfolk, securing their inclusion in climate-related decision-making processes. Through targeted advocacy and dialogue with local government officials, the project successfully integrated a women-focused component into the national fisheries strategy review, improving women's access to essential registration and identification.

Similarly, in Pakistan, **Sustainable Social Development Organisation (SSDO)** galvanised youth participation through citizen journalism and advocacy in Punjab. This culminated in the inaugural Punjab Youth Summit on Climate Change, attended by almost 500 young activists and policy-makers, embedding youth perspectives firmly into the provincial climate agenda.

Elsewhere, our partners in small island states have creatively championed climate resilience. In Vanuatu, our creative grant supported **Wan Smolbag Theatre** to raise awareness of biodiversity loss through music workshops and performances, vividly communicating climate impacts and community-based solutions.

Collectively, these projects exemplify the breadth of our climate justice impact: from enhancing community-level resilience and amplifying marginalised voices, to influencing national policies and global climate dialogue. Our grants have empowered civil society to become effective agents of climate justice, ensuring communities most impacted by climate change are central to solutions.

The sample of grants explored in this report is limited to projects that have been completed and assessed. The majority are from the cohort approved by the Grants Committee in 2021. Additional significant results from this sample are presented in the case study on page 42.

Bringing the voice of civil society into climate policy spaces

UN Climate Change Conference

The UN Climate Change Conference (COP) has been central to our work on climate justice throughout the strategic period. In 2021, our *Critical Conversation* on **Small Island States and Climate Justice: Looking Ahead to COP26** highlighted the unique challenges facing small island states at the frontline of climate change and the critical role the Commonwealth could play at COP26. To amplify these perspectives, we commissioned two freelance journalists from Fiji and Trinidad and Tobago to report on the priorities for COP26 from a regional lens.

COP27 in November 2022 provided a key opportunity to strengthen our strategic focus on climate justice and the interests of the Commonwealth’s small and vulnerable states. Ahead of the conference, we convened two events on *just transitions and climate reparations*, building on the Foundation’s growing body of work on climate-induced loss and damage.

During COP27, the Foundation took the lead in bringing the voices of the Commonwealth’s frontline countries to a global audience. Two high-profile events, hosted with the Government of Vanuatu, spotlighted how some of the smallest and most vulnerable Commonwealth states are using international law to secure climate justice. Panellists included the President of Vanuatu, the Prime Minister of The Bahamas, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, and leading climate lawyers advocating for legal action through international courts and tribunals.

We also supported civil society engagement at COP27, focusing on capacity strengthening for young negotiators working on loss and damage. Additionally, we supported journalists from vulnerable Commonwealth states to cover the conference and share the stories and perspectives of frontline communities with a wider audience.

Living out our commitment to careful stewardship of resources, the Foundation chose not to field a team at COP28. Instead, we used modest funds to strengthen civil society engagement by sponsoring several journalists and young climate negotiators from the Commonwealth’s small and climate-vulnerable states.

In July 2025, a ruling by the International Courts of Justice confirmed that states and corporations have clear legal obligations to address climate change. To sustain civil society engagement in this process we convened climate advocates to reflect on the implications of the ruling with the outputs widely seen and shared at COP30 in Brazil.

‘Running through the conference—both in the panel and in the chatroom—was the optimism of youth and the gritty determination of civic society, qualities the Commonwealth Foundation has tapped into over the years.’

Debbie Ransome, Commonwealth Round Table, reporting on the *Critical Conversation* in the wake of the ICJ advisory opinion

Strengthening climate journalism

Our pilot efforts to strengthen climate journalism in small island and climate-vulnerable states—where media is often underfunded and under-resourced—have evolved throughout the strategic period. With Foundation support, the Earth Journalism Network (EJN) delivered its first virtual fellowship in 2022, providing five journalists from small and vulnerable states with the opportunity to cover **COP27** as part of their Climate Change Media Partnership programme. Guided by EJN trainers on the ground in Egypt, the journalists—from Bangladesh, Saint Lucia, Solomon Islands, Jamaica, and Papua New Guinea—published 18 stories, deepening public understanding of the challenges facing their home countries. The fellows also gained valuable networking and mentorship opportunities and improved their knowledge of the COP process.

In 2023, we supported media organisations from Belize and Fiji to dispatch journalists to **COP28**, encouraging the production of detailed, long-form reporting on the unique experiences of small and vulnerable states and the challenges and opportunities presented by international climate negotiations. The resulting story made the front page of the *Fiji Sun*, and several reports featured on the evening news on *Channel 5 Belize*.

We also sponsored journalists to attend and report on **CHOGM 2024**, including the People’s Forum. They posed numerous questions to Foreign Ministers, the Secretary-General, and other senior Government officials. These interventions served as a powerful reminder of the precarious state of press freedom in many Commonwealth countries, and of the essential role journalists play in holding governments accountable and amplifying marginalised voices.

Supporting global action on Loss and Damage

In February 2022, over 2,000 people from 72 countries registered for our *Critical Conversation*, **Climate Reparations: Opportunities and Obstacles for the Commonwealth’s Small Island States**, which explored legal and political options for loss and damage compensation—including the new Commission on Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law.

In 2023, the Foundation supported young climate negotiators from the Commonwealth’s small and climate-vulnerable states to participate in the Africa Climate Summit in Kenya. Two of these negotiators also attended COP28 with Foundation support, where they made significant contributions to the adoption of the Loss and Damage Fund and the inclusion of loss and damage in the Global Stocktake and the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance.

In September 2023, our roundtable on **Global Finance for People and Planet** marked a pivotal moment for our *Critical Conversations* series. For the first time, civil society insights on the climate crisis—distilled from the roundtable—informed background papers for the Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting in November 2023.

Building links between climate and health

Across multiple areas of our work, we are recognising and responding to the links between climate and health, particularly in small island states, where the combined pressures of environmental and health crises are intensifying vulnerability.

In May 2024, we co-hosted an intergenerational dialogue at the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) in partnership with the Government of Samoa. The event explored the **fundamental connection between health and climate resilience in small island states**, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of young people. This event served as a key stepping stone in the lead-up to CHOGM 2024 in Samoa, identifying common challenges and opportunities for strengthening health systems in climate-vulnerable contexts.

‘Across multiple areas of our work, we are recognising and responding to the links between climate and health, particularly in small island states, where the combined pressures of environmental and health crises are intensifying vulnerability.’

Results 2021–2026

20,532

The number of people who signed up to our pre-COP *Critical Conversations*.

34

The number of photographers who featured in our climate photography exhibitions at the 2023 Africa Climate Summit, the 2024 People’s Forum, and COP28.

43

The number of articles and video reports published in national media across seven Commonwealth Small Island and Vulnerable States by journalists supported by the Foundation.

Climate justice: what we have learned

- **Frontline states need greater access and amplification:** When government and civil society from small island states work closely together and have space to lead, they can shape powerful legal and policy responses.
- **Civil society participation strengthens accountability:** Our grants in Malawi and Punjab demonstrated that community-led action and youth advocacy can guide governments toward fairer, more effective climate responses.
- **Creative platforms widen reach:** Arts-based methods including Wan Smolbag Theatre’s climate performances helped connect policy to people, especially youth and marginalised groups.
- **Climate justice is gender justice:** Initiatives in Bangladesh and at the 2023 Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting affirmed that women and girls must be central to climate planning and implementation.
- **Youth bring energy and credibility:** From the Punjab Youth Summit to COP28, young people have shown they are not just future leaders—they are critical to today’s climate negotiations and policy innovation.
- **Climate and health are inextricably linked:** Climate-related events worsen health vulnerabilities, especially in small and vulnerable states where overlapping crises intensify existing inequalities. Addressing these challenges collectively is essential to building resilient, inclusive systems that leave no one behind.

We learned that securing climate justice requires strong connections between grassroots experiences and global decisions. When civil society, especially from small and vulnerable states, is equipped and heard, climate solutions become more just, inclusive, and effective.



H.E. Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa, Prime Minister of Samoa, speaking alongside Shem Ochola OGW, Commonwealth Foundation Deputy Director-General, at the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States in Samoa

Looking ahead

Our work on climate justice has highlighted the value of equipping civil society to lead from the front. There are several areas we could build on further: strengthening intergenerational advocacy, legal literacy, as well as providing more opportunities for cross-regional exchange, particularly among small states. Ahead of CHOGM 2026 and beyond, we will deepen our support for civil society engagement in global climate finance and legal processes.

The Foundation can add value by drawing attention to the links between climate and health and investing in creative platforms that shift narratives and illustrate the experience of ordinary Commonwealth citizens on the frontline of the climate crisis. Further Foundation engagement with the issue of climate change must ensure that those least responsible for the climate crisis remain central to shaping the Commonwealth’s response.

‘Every day, we come face to face with the links between climate justice and health justice. From the spread of non-communicable diseases to the mental health challenges triggered by climate displacement, we cannot separate one from the other. Our people’s wellbeing and our planet’s future are interconnected, and we must find solutions that address both.’

H.E. Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa,
Prime Minister of Samoa

A participant asking a question at the 2024 People’s Forum, Samoa



Case study

Climate justice: amplifying the concerns of civil society and small island states

Key result:

- 
Partner capacity
- 
Civil society voice
- 
Policy-maker responsiveness
- 
Policy change

Independent evaluator statement:



‘The Commonwealth Foundation has played a pivotal role in amplifying the climate justice concerns of small island states, enabling their civil society and youth voices to engage in intergovernmental decision-making at United Nations Climate Conferences (COPs), Commonwealth Ministers, and Heads of Government Meetings. Recognising the unique vulnerabilities of small island states to rising sea levels, extreme weather, and diminishing resources, the Foundation convened spaces where their leaders, activists, and policy experts could express their voices on the global stage.’



The Rt Hon Philip Davis, Prime Minister of The Bahamas, panellist at our high-level COP27 dialogue © Resilience Hub

The Commonwealth Foundation seized key opportunities at COP26, COP27, and CHOGM 2024 to elevate the role of small island states and civil society in global climate governance. Its engagement supported breakthrough legal efforts and equipped young climate leaders and creatives to shape public discourse and influence policy outcomes.

At COP26, the Foundation spotlighted the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (COSIS-CCIL), helping expand its membership from two to nine states. In 2022, COSIS-CCIL filed proceedings before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), seeking recognition of CO₂ as a marine pollutant. The May 2024 ruling affirmed the legal obligations of states to prevent CO₂ pollution in oceans—paving the way for further international climate litigation and solidifying the position of small island states as climate justice pioneers.

The Foundation’s *Critical Conversations* events in 2022 convened activists, lawyers, and policy-makers to examine pathways for legal action, which informed strategic decisions by COSIS-CCIL and the Vanuatu-led campaign to bring a request for an advisory opinion to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). At COP27,

‘The Commonwealth Foundation [amplified] the message of small island states in the run-up to and during COP27, one year after COSIS was established, at the crucial moment when we needed to get more members. Shortly after COP27, we went to ITLOS.’

COSIS leader (independent interview)

 November 2022	 May 2024	 Late 2024	 July 2025
The Foundation convened civil society and co-hosted COP27 dialogues that accelerated the Vanuatu climate justice campaign.	A legal breakthrough: advocacy efforts contributed to the Tribunal ruling that states must prevent oceanic CO ₂ pollution.	Civil society, supported by the Foundation, shaped CHOGM policy dialogue and helped launched a climate case at the International Court of Justice.	ICJ ruling confirmed that states and corporations have clear legal obligations to address climate change.

‘It changed my life and my career. The Foundation grant empowered young female negotiators like me to gain trust and confidence to take the microphone at COP events and represent their country.’

Youth climate negotiator (independent interview)

the Foundation co-hosted high-level dialogues with the Government of Vanuatu, drawing unprecedented attention to its initiative. These efforts helped gain global traction, culminating in invitations for Vanuatu to co-lead ministerial negotiations at COP28 and COP29, and UN General Assembly endorsement of the request for an advisory opinion from the ICJ.

The Foundation also provided targeted support aimed at building the capacity of young civil society actors. Through the Loss and Damage Youth Coalition, young people gained skills and confidence to advocate effectively at COP27. Young women from small island states secured new national roles in research and negotiation, contributing directly to the strength of their governments’ climate positions.

Similarly, through Foundation support to the Earth Journalism Network, journalists from small and vulnerable states received training to report on COP27. They brought underrepresented stories of climate injustice to local and global audiences—strengthening public understanding and accountability.

‘There’s a huge range of possibilities, all depending on what the ICJ advisory opinion says in the next couple of months, which will have direct consequences for all civil society and all states around the world, including the Commonwealth.’

COSIS legal advisor (independent interview)

Ahead of CHOGM 2024, the Foundation convened more than 3,000 civil society stakeholders through regional consultations and *Critical Conversations* to co-develop a position statement on climate and development finance. At the Commonwealth People’s Forum, civil society leaders presented actionable proposals to government ministers, reinforcing the legitimacy of people-centred finance solutions.

In December 2024, Vanuatu, with support from the General Assembly, submitted its request for an advisory opinion to the ICJ, with advocates drawing on the ITLOS opinion to argue for stronger legal obligations on climate action. A positive ruling in July 2025 confirmed that states and corporations have clear legal obligations to address climate change, strengthening global accountability and enabling civil society to press for legal enforcement of climate commitments.

The Foundation’s role—amplifying underrepresented voices and fostering youth leadership—was widely recognised. Stakeholders highlighted its flexible, values-driven approach, the passion of its team, and its ability to turn limited resources into catalytic change.

‘The Foundation organised the event [at COP 27] and brought the Commonwealth Secretary-General and our President into this high-level forum. And the room was absolutely packed—it was a standing room, it was like sardines in a tin, people who wanted to hear what Vanuatu had to say, which was incredible. Never had Vanuatu had that level of attention from a global audience.’

Senior government official (independent interview)

Read the full report [here:](#)



Case study

Advancing health and climate justice in Cameroon

Key result:



Partner capacity



Civil society voice



Policy-maker responsiveness



Policy change

Independent evaluator statement:



‘Strategic support from the Commonwealth Foundation has enabled RELUFA to transform local grievances into influential policy dialogues in Cameroon’s East Region by amplifying civil society voices, spurring enhanced government responsiveness, and catalysing a tangible shift in government policy priorities for rehabilitating hazardous mining sites. With the Foundation’s support, RELUFA brought the concerns of local communities to national decision-makers, driving a partial clean-up of derelict sites and renewed momentum toward a regulatory decree for the country’s Mining Site Rehabilitation Fund.’

‘And because of this documentary, there was actually a national discussion that placed a lot of pressure on the policy-makers, and that we were invited to the Prime Minister’s Office to talk about this project and how the prime minister can also engage to find solutions to the problems.’

Grant partner (independent interview)



Participants at a policy workshop to advocate for rehabilitating hazardous mining sites in Cameroon’s East Region, convened by grant partner RELUFA

June 2022

With Foundation support, RELUFA releases a documentary on abandoned mining sites and begins policy workshops with national ministries.

March 2023

Cross-sector workshops facilitate dialogue between ministries and communities; gendered analysis sharpens pressure for inclusive environmental and health policies.

October 2024

Prime Minister’s office pledges to sign long-awaited decree operationalising the Mining Site Rehabilitation Fund, following sustained civil society advocacy.

‘...finally, the government is seeing the rationale and the need to complete the decree of application of the mining code, and also to institute the rehabilitation fund [...]. And without the funding, the financial support from the Commonwealth Foundation, we couldn’t have done this.’

Grant partner (independent interview)

In Cameroon’s East Region, deforestation and environmental degradation caused by unrestored mining sites have created serious public health risks. Communities living near abandoned pits face heightened vulnerability to disease, injury, and displacement, yet enforcement of relevant provisions of the 2016 Mining Code remains weak in the absence of a critical Implementation Decree. To address this, the Réseau de Lutte contre la Faim (RELUFA) designed an advocacy initiative that combined rigorous research with creative storytelling, empowering communities—especially women—to speak out on environmental injustices and demand accountability from the state.

With support from the Commonwealth Foundation, RELUFA converted this community evidence into tangible policy momentum. The grant enabled the production of a documentary that vividly captured the health, social, and economic harms of abandoned mining sites. This strategic communication tool drew national attention, demonstrating the urgency of mining site rehabilitation. The documentary linked local experience to national policy, elevating voices that are often excluded from formal decision-making spaces.

The Foundation’s support also enabled RELUFA to convene a series of high-level policy dialogues. Officials from the Ministries of Mines, Environment, Public Health, and Territorial Administration joined community representatives in structured workshops that bridged institutional silos. These meetings broke new ground, generating a shared understanding across government sectors and civil society. Early

remedial actions were taken—including the filling of hazardous pits—and the Prime Minister’s office pledged to expedite the signing of the long-delayed Implementation Decree that would operationalise the Mining Site Rehabilitation Fund.

Beyond policy engagement, the initiative deepened community voice and agency. Through targeted mobilisation, residents strengthened their ability to articulate concerns and influence national debates. A gender-sensitive approach ensured that the burdens borne disproportionately by women—such as loss of farmland and heightened exposure to water-borne disease—were acknowledged in policy spaces.

The Foundation’s support has helped catalyse a shift in government responsiveness to civil society voice; however, securing the finalisation and implementation of the decree will require continued pressure. Sustained support for dialogue, policy briefs, and community engagement will be essential to ensure the Mining Site Rehabilitation Fund becomes fully operational. Future efforts should also build on this momentum to deepen the integration of gender and climate justice into regulatory reform.

‘One thing that we have succeeded to do is to get these communities involved and mobilised, instead of people waiting for us to do it for them. So at the local level, they now have some sort of a mechanism for sharing information, and bringing it to us at the national level [...]’

Grant partner (independent interview)

Read the full report here:



Freedom of expression

At the Commonwealth Foundation, we recognise that freedom of expression, including media freedom, is a fundamental value and a core priority for the Commonwealth. It is embedded in the Commonwealth Charter as a prerequisite for democracy—shaping how citizens can engage constructively in governance, challenge injustice, and hold their governments to account. Our mandate to support vibrant and free civil society throughout the Commonwealth places a special obligation on us to help advance this fundamental human right, irrespective of political sensitivity.

Across the reporting period, we have supported a wide range of projects that encourage media freedom, civic participation in governance, and the use of creative expression to push for real and lasting change. We have provided space for civil society to engage in free and open discussion and debate, integrated creative voices into advocacy, explored ways to

strengthen quality journalism— particularly in small and vulnerable states—and supported storytellers and artists to realise their right to creative expression. Our work to increase civil society engagement in policy and decision-making forums explicitly aims to give voice to those whose perspectives and interests may otherwise go unheard.



Performance at the 2025 High Commissioners' Festive Poetry Evening

Impact and change enabled by our grants

The Foundation's grants have significantly strengthened freedom of expression across the Commonwealth, empowering communities to participate actively in governance through creative and inclusive means.

In South Africa, the **Sibikwa Arts Centre** used theatre and performance to energise young people and communities in Ekurhuleni district, creating vibrant spaces—called 'Urban Labs'—for public dialogue. These labs brought over 100 community stakeholders and local government officials together, fostering a transformative approach to urban governance by directly involving citizens in policy solutions.

Creative expression also played a pivotal role in Tonga, where **Seleka International** harnessed the power of art to uplift spirits following the devastating volcanic eruption of January 2022. Through mural art on abandoned buildings, they engaged local communities and sparked conversations about resilience and collective identity. Prominent Tongan artist Tevita Latu and young local artists transformed these spaces, prompting deeper community dialogue on the role of art in recovery and daily life.

In Sri Lanka, **Transparency International** empowered citizens to demand greater transparency in health procurement. With Foundation support, they trained local leaders to monitor corruption, equipped 294 officials with open contracting tools, and reached nearly 500 people through awareness sessions. A national roundtable and Supreme Court petitions amplified calls for systemic reform.

Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate the power of free expression in promoting civic engagement, government accountability, and social cohesion. By integrating artistic expression into advocacy and governance processes, our grants partners have fostered inclusive, participatory environments that amplify community voices and facilitate lasting change. Moving forward, this vibrant intersection of creativity and civic engagement offers a compelling blueprint for expanding the democratic space within the Commonwealth.

The sample of grants explored in this report is limited to projects that have been completed and assessed. The majority are from the cohort approved by the Grants Committee in 2021. Additional significant results from this sample are presented in the case study on page 48.

Results 2021–2026

9,178

The number of registrations for our *Critical Conversations* on media freedom.

33

The number of stories we published from writers in 23 countries as part of our special *adda* collection on the theme of freedom of expression called *Speak OUT!*

75

The number of young journalists trained on freedom of expression and right to information laws.*

*As part of our open call grant with Sri Lanka Journalist Forum.

Commonwealth Principles on Media Freedom

At CHOGM 2024, Commonwealth Heads of Government adopted the *Commonwealth Principles on Freedom of Expression and the Role of Media in Good Governance* (the *Principles*), elevating media freedom as a shared Commonwealth priority. The principles affirm the commitment of Member States to a principled and rights-based approach to freedom of expression—a major milestone for the Commonwealth. The Director-General of the Foundation, Dr Anne Gallagher, was part of the expert advisory group supporting the drafting of the principles, underscoring the Foundation's leading role in this area.

Two years earlier, the Foundation convened a panel of key figures in law, diplomacy, and journalism to examine how media freedom is being threatened across the Commonwealth and how the principles might be used for positive change. The *Critical Conversation, The People's Voice: A Stronger Commonwealth Code for Media Freedom* drew participants from 38 countries, including officials from the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and the Commonwealth Journalists Association. A research report on the state of media freedom in the Commonwealth commissioned by the Foundation and presented by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies served as a springboard for conversation. The points made in the discussion, as well as findings from the report itself, were flagged at the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting in November 2022, where Ministers agreed to recommend the new Principles to Heads of Government at CHOGM 2024.

This high-level policy outcome demonstrates the Foundation's ability to contribute to change by connecting civil society input within decision-making spaces.

Using creativity to support free expression

Creative voices have the power to shape public discourse, challenge censorship, and open new avenues for civic engagement. The Foundation has lived out its commitment to freedom of expression by heralding the power of art and creativity to foster change.

A series of events held throughout the reporting period explored how artists contribute to the political arena and how creative expression can drive change on social issues. Most recently, we used the platform of Commonwealth Day 2025 to host an event that examined how culture and creativity are shaping movements for justice across the Commonwealth. The event showcased artists and activists from diverse Commonwealth regions, highlighting the role of music, film, and literature in mobilising communities and challenging injustice.

Our 2025 Commonwealth Day video—a dramatic voice performance of poetry which explores the values of the Charter—was viewed by over **1.6 million people** across our online channels and resulted in thousands of Commonwealth citizens co-signing the Commonwealth Charter.



Browse our Commonwealth Day videos since 2022 [here](#)



In November 2022, Law Ministers agreed to recommend the new *Commonwealth Principles on Freedom of Expression* to Heads of Government

‘Creative voices have the power to shape public discourse, challenge censorship, and open new avenues for civic engagement. The Foundation has lived out its commitment to freedom of expression by heralding the power of art and creativity to foster change.’

Freedom of expression: what we have learned

- **The Commonwealth is responsive to civil society, but international agreements are just the start:** Our engagement helped civil society shape the *Principles*, demonstrating how civil society can meaningfully influence high-level outcomes in the Commonwealth system. The adoption of the *Principles* marked a major achievement—but turning words into action requires genuine commitment from Member States and additional measures to ensure accountability.
- **Civil society brings urgency and local insight:** Projects in Sri Lanka and South Africa proved that when citizens are given space and tools, they are effective in challenging injustice and reimagining democratic participation.
- **Creativity engages communities:** Our partners have shown that creative expression can unlock dialogue and deepen engagement—especially where traditional civic spaces are restricted.
- **Small and vulnerable states need greater support:** Our support for journalism fellowships revealed how under-resourced media landscapes in vulnerable states can benefit from targeted mentorship and international exposure.
- **Stronger partnerships extend reach:** Working with the Commonwealth Journalists Association, UNESCO, and other institutions has enabled us to elevate free expression as a shared Commonwealth concern and reinforce our legitimacy as a convener and advocate.

We learned that freedom of expression cannot be safeguarded through policy alone—it must be lived, practiced, and defended by artists, activists, journalists, and everyday citizens. When citizens can speak freely and access information, they are better able to scrutinise power, hold institutions to account, and participate in democratic processes that improve governance and ensure no one is left behind. Supporting freedom of expression, especially in restrictive or underfunded contexts, remains essential to strengthening democracy across the Commonwealth.

Looking ahead

Our support to civil society partners has shown that combining policy advocacy with grassroots creative and civic action yields the greatest results. Moving forward, the Foundation should consider supporting projects that seek to strengthen legal protections while investing in creative, media, and civil society ecosystems; advancing support for national journalism associations and artist collectives; and focusing attention on projects that expand media training and communications skills for civil society actors across the Commonwealth.

Sibikwa Arts Centre



‘Freedom of expression cannot be safeguarded through policy alone—it must be lived, practiced, and defended by artists, activists, journalists, and everyday citizens. When citizens can speak freely and access information, they are better able to scrutinise power, hold institutions to account, and participate in democratic processes that improve governance and ensure no one is left behind.’

Case study

Strengthening freedom of expression in Sri Lanka

Key result:

Partner capacity

Civil society voice

Policy-maker responsiveness

Policy change

Independent evaluator statement:

‘The Commonwealth Foundation grant empowered the Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum (SDJF) to transform a restrictive media environment by strategically strengthening civil society capacity and voice. Through targeted training, innovative digital platforms, and structured policy dialogues, the initiative mobilised 75 young journalists and artists to challenge restrictions on freedom of expression. The project outcomes illustrate how the support catalysed observable change in advocacy and media engagement, translating grassroots narratives into influential policy inputs while fostering a culture of transparency and accountability.’

‘Through its flexible and responsive support for SDJF, the Commonwealth Foundation contributed to meaningful and lasting gains in civic voice, institutional capacity, and inclusive policy engagement.’

In Sri Lanka, despite constitutional guarantees, freedom of expression remains constrained, including by restrictive post-war and post-pandemic legislation. These limitations have contributed to widespread self-censorship, particularly among marginalised communities. Recognising the importance of civic voice in building accountability and trust, the Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum (SDJF) identified an urgent need to close the knowledge gap on the Right to Information (RTI) and strengthen the capacity of civil society to engage. With support from the Commonwealth Foundation, SDJF devised a holistic project to enhance advocacy skills, promote inclusive storytelling, and build sustained platforms for public participation.

The intervention targeted systemic challenges by creating a safe and inclusive environment for expression. SDJF convened a diverse network of 75 early-career journalists and artists—32% of whom were women and over half from religious and ethnic minority communities. Participants engaged in intensive training on ethical journalism, RTI application processes, and legal literacy. This was reinforced through the development of the ‘Independent Voice’ digital hub and a comprehensive Freedom of

Expression (FoE) and RTI website, which collectively provided enduring resources for peer learning and public engagement. Interactive tools such as live-streamed discussions and digital storytelling enabled sustained two-way communication with government actors and amplified underrepresented voices.

The Foundation’s grant was pivotal. It enabled SDJF to co-develop a robust capacity-building framework tailored to Sri Lanka’s civic landscape. Training modules were adapted to demystify complex laws, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Online Safety Act, which can serve to inhibit robust expression. The Foundation also supported the enhancement of SDJF’s Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) systems, introducing refined log frames and progress indicators to ensure that evidence-informed improvements were captured and applied.

The Foundation’s support also helped amplify civil society voice by enabling the creation of digital and creative content that brought grassroots perspectives to national attention. The network produced over 160 original outputs—including short films, podcasts, photojournalism, and digital video stories. These media stories triggered responses from

 June 2022	 November 2022	 March 2023
Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum trained 75 emerging journalists and artists in legal literacy, ethical reporting, and Right to Information.	The ‘Independent Voice’ digital platform and Freedom of Expression/ Right to Information website launched, showcasing 161 grassroots media and advocacy outputs.	Structured workshops and roundtables enabled increased Right to Information responsiveness and direct engagement between civil society and government officials.

Young journalists participating in a training session organised by grant partner, Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum



local authorities, such as corrective measures on issues of unfair taxi-fare systems and coastal erosion. In parallel, the Foundation helped SDJF create an innovative space for face-to-face dialogue where civil society and government actors jointly explored policy solutions. These engagements strengthened official responsiveness to RTI requests and laid the groundwork for a replicable model of policy dialogue.

Through its flexible and responsive support for SDJF, the Commonwealth Foundation contributed to meaningful and lasting gains in civic voice, institutional capacity, and inclusive policy engagement. The project delivered a coordinated approach to capacity-building, storytelling, and MEL that continues to shape public discourse and democratic practice in Sri Lanka. While progress has been substantial, challenges remain in institutionalising regular cross-partner coordination and sustaining MEL capacity beyond the grant period: continued investment in these areas will be vital to maintaining and scaling the project’s long-term impact.

‘Interactive tools such as live streamed discussions and digital storytelling enabled sustained two-way communication with government actors and amplified underrepresented voices.’

Read the full report [here](#):



Strengthening civil society through grants

More-inclusive, innovative grant making

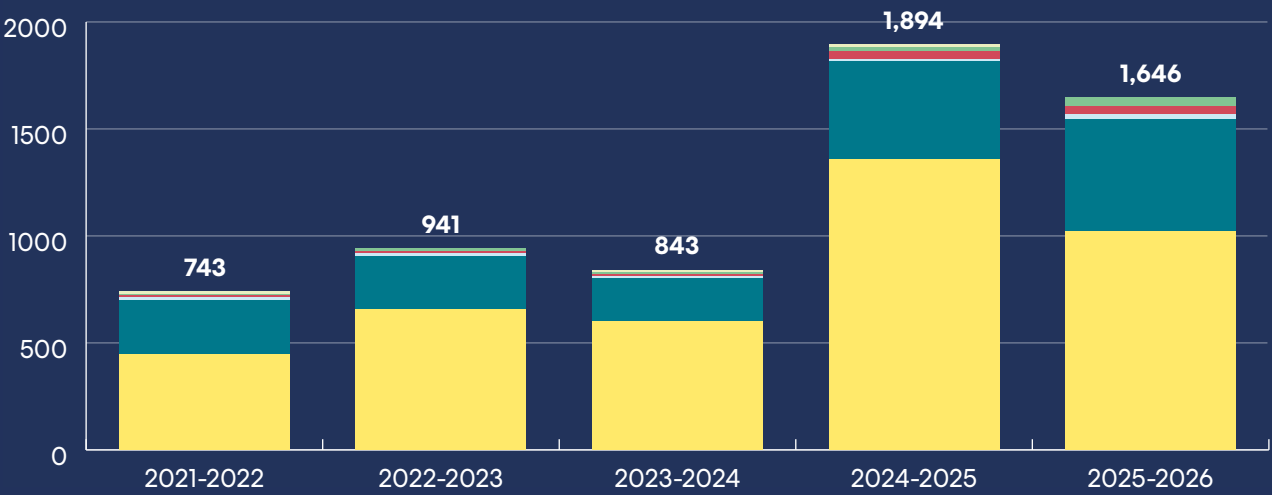
The Foundation has a long-standing commitment to supporting Commonwealth civil society organisations with funding for projects aligned with our focus areas. Our 2021–2026 strategic plan placed grants at the heart of our engagement with civil society, initiating a refinement and expansion of our programme. That strategy has delivered: over the past five years, the Foundation has awarded more grants to more countries than even before.

Over the past five years, we have supplemented our longstanding ‘open call’ with two additional grants streams: **capacity strengthening grants** and **creative grants**. Through a combination of funding and tailored

support, these new mechanisms target our small and vulnerable member states, helping smaller and less-well-established organisations to thrive.

We’ve simplified our internal processes and requirements, ensuring that the Foundation is a trusted and supportive partner. We have been able to allocate more than £5 million for grants over the strategic period—though rising fixed costs are making it increasingly difficult to set aside such a large portion of our annual budgets. In the coming years, we will need to work closely with our governors to identify ways to sustain this core commitment.

Eligible open call grant applications 2021–2026



Year	Africa	Asia	Canada & Europe	Caribbean	Pacific	Multi-region	Total
2021-2022	447	254	10	11	5	16	743
2022-2023	655	251	14	8	13	—	941
2023-2024	602	201	7	13	6	14	843
2024-2025	1,356	462	6	38	20	12	1,894
2025-2026	1,021	523	25	39	38	—	1,646

Open call grants

The open call remains our largest grants stream. Each year, we invite civil society organisations to apply for financial support (up to **£30,000 per year for a maximum of two years**) for strong projects that address one or more of our focus areas. A record **79 open call grants**, have been awarded in this strategic period to date.

While the open call is a competitive process, we’ve implemented targeted strategies—such as tailored outreach and guidance during the application process—to ensure that organisations from small and vulnerable states are not left behind.

Our ‘Ask Me Anything’ sessions offer direct guidance on the application process, including eligibility, reporting and project themes. In 2025, the session attracted 799 registrants from 39 countries. We also provided a facility to view the recording afterwards to ensure that even those unable to attend in real time, such as registrants from the Pacific region, were able to benefit fully from the session.

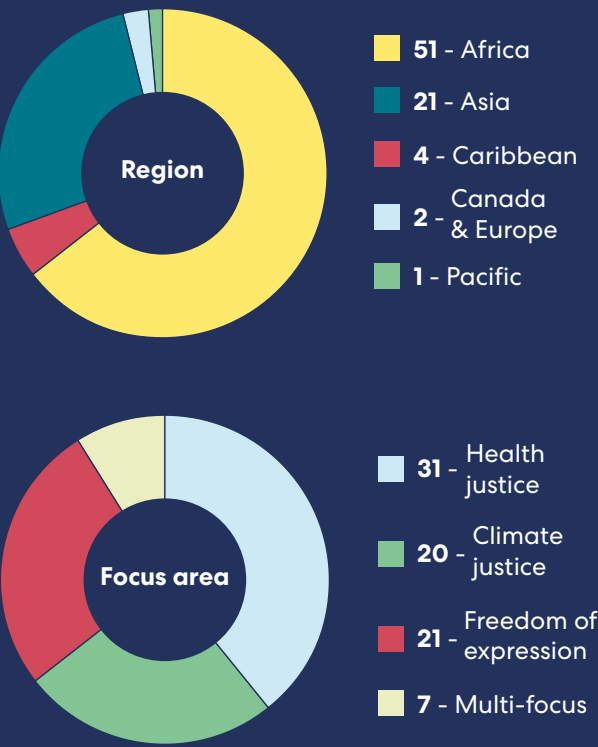
The number of applications has increased steadily throughout the strategic period, with significant increases in representation from the Caribbean and Pacific regions. This sustained growth reflects several factors:

- Greater visibility of the Foundation across the Commonwealth
- Successful outreach to low-submission countries
- More eligible countries following our work on universal membership and arrears recovery
- Improvements to the online application platform, enhancing accessibility and transparency

Greater engagement brings challenges. The increasing volume of applications places pressure on our review and selection processes, and maintaining integrity is critical; we must ensure the open call remains a competition rather than a lottery where too many strong projects go unfunded. The Foundation is actively exploring ways to sustain this vital grant stream into the future.

‘The number of applications has increased steadily throughout the strategic period, with significant increases in representation from the Caribbean and Pacific regions.’

79 open call grants were awarded between 2021 and 2025



Community members dancing together to raise awareness of the National Cancer Control Plan in an event organised by grant partner, Uganda Cancer Society



Capacity strengthening grants

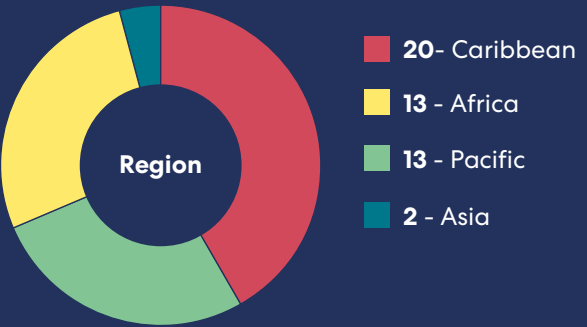
The capacity strengthening grants stream began as a pilot during this strategic period and has evolved into a core pillar of our support for civil society, exposing a niche where our programming can make a substantial difference in strengthening the voice and agency of civil society. Designed to address the entrenched disadvantages that smaller organisations in the Commonwealth’s small and vulnerable states face when competing for open call funding, the mechanism provides a combination of funding and tailored support to help these ‘diamonds in the rough’ to grow and thrive.

In 2023, implementing lessons from the pilot phase, governors approved adjustments to improve accessibility and maintain high levels of personalised support required by smaller organisations that are often operating in challenging environments to ensure the successful completion of their projects. We are mindful to balance this commitment with our obligation to ensure that project funds are being spent wisely and responsibly.

This new stream has expanded our reach to almost every small and vulnerable Commonwealth country and, more significantly, to organisations capable of creating meaningful change but that missed out on funding opportunities under our highly-competitive open call. In this way, capacity strengthening grants have enabled the Foundation to substantially enhance the inclusivity of our grants offering.

Over the past four years, we have awarded **48 capacity strengthening grants**, most of them to small organisations in the Caribbean, Pacific, and Indian Ocean that are too-often overlooked by traditional funding models. In addition, the Foundation has provided 20 grants to winners of the 2025 Commonwealth Youth Awards to help them scale up their success, following a collaboration with the Secretariat. Capacity strengthening grant awards for the 2025–2026 reporting period were being finalised at the time of writing.

48 capacity strengthening grants were awarded between 2021 and 2025



Creative grants

The creative grants stream was introduced as a pilot under this strategy, reflecting the Foundation’s commitment to leveraging creative expression to promote positive change—for example, by supporting organisations that use storytelling and poetry to advance climate justice.

Launched in 2021, the pilot had two components:

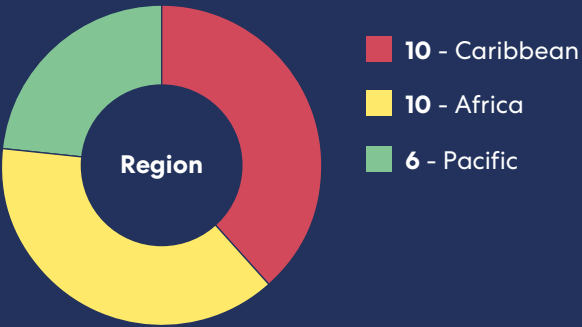
- 1. **Creative elements within open call grants** – additional funding for optional creative components within open call grant projects.
- 2. **Standalone small creative grants** – direct support to strengthen the capacity of artists and writers working on issues aligned with our focus areas.

Over the first three years, we provided additional creative funding to **13 open call grant partners** and awarded **26 standalone creative grants** to individuals and organisations across the Africa, Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and Pacific regions.

To help shape our future direction, we gathered the experiences and insights of grant partners through a learning exchange as part of a review of the pilot phase. Accordingly, we retained the overall goal of the creative grants initiative while refining the delivery mechanism to enhance efficiency and impact for the final two years of the strategic period. In parallel, we have continued to explore how best to integrate and support creative expression within our next strategic plan.

Please refer to page 70 for a detailed case study exploring significant results from our creative grants stream.

26 creative grants were awarded between 2021 and 2024



Finalising legacy grants

Over the past five years, the Foundation has continued to support **31 multi-year projects** related to grants awarded in the previous strategic period. Having drawn to a close, this cohort of legacy grants delivered significant and wide-ranging impact across the Commonwealth during the reporting period:

- In India, the **Human Rights Advocacy Foundation** helped strengthen the implementation of the Prevention of Atrocities Act, leading to a 300% increase in conviction rates for crimes against Scheduled Castes and Tribes.
- **Malawi Network of Older People’s Organisations (MANEPO)** played a central role in passing the country’s first-ever Older Persons Act, a landmark law offering justiciable rights, protection frameworks, and welfare provisions.
- **Kiribati Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (KANGO)** amplified community voices on climate-induced displacement and influenced five government policy submissions.
- In Malaysia, **Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (DHRRA)** successfully advocated for constitutional reform on citizenship rights, while spotlighting statelessness in international human rights forums.
- In Mozambique, the **Micaia Foundation** supported 15,000 youth in shaping a local development youth agenda.
- In Nigeria, **Youth Alive Foundation** catalysed state-level implementation of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, leading to increased prosecutions and securing government support for survivors.
- In Pakistan, South Africa, and Malawi (through three distinct projects), grants empowered women, farm dwellers, transgender and intersex persons, and inland fishers to shape laws, policies, and public narratives—making visible those too often left behind.

‘Over the past three years, we have provided additional creative funding to 13 open call grant partners and awarded 26 standalone creative grants.’

‘We see our role as extending well beyond funding—our focus is on equipping our partners for long-term success. An open call grant, for example, can give an organisation the credibility and capacity to secure larger funding for future projects.’

More than money: building capacity and future success

The Foundation’s resources are modest. We can only meet a fraction of the urgent needs across Commonwealth civil society, but we commit to making those resources work harder, thereby maximising their impact.

We see our role as extending well beyond funding—our focus is on equipping our partners for long-term success. An open call grant, for example, can give an organisation the credibility and capacity to secure larger funding for future projects. For smaller organisations supported through our capacity strengthening stream, our hands-on guidance on budgeting and reporting can help them build the skills and systems needed for sustainable growth.

We value the insights and experiences of our partners. They are on the front lines of change, and their feedback ensures that our approach remains relevant and effective. By providing opportunities for our partners to connect and learn from each other, we are nurturing a culture of **solidarity and shared learning**.

Our support is tailored and practical:

- One-on-one meetings and tailored advice
- Annual workshops to strengthen knowledge and skills in management, partnership building, monitoring and evaluation, and gender equality
- Compliance workshops focused on practical guidance, especially around financial reporting
- Additional learning opportunities for small and vulnerable organisations to strengthen capacity on financial administration and reporting
- Learning exchanges for our creative grants partners to explore how creative methods can enhance advocacy and civic engagement.

The Foundation’s focus on impact and long-term growth ensures that even the smallest grant can create a ripple effect—helping our partners become stronger, more sustainable, and more effective in delivering change.

Our impact through grants

The Foundation’s expanded and diversified grants programme has deepened its reach and strengthened civil society across the Commonwealth.

- **Wider reach, deeper roots:** We have awarded more grants to more countries than ever before—with targeted outreach, enhanced access and new grant streams that have improved our reach to small island developing states.
- **Shifting power through tailored support:** Capacity strengthening grants helped smaller organisations grow in confidence and influence, particularly in small and vulnerable states. Several have since secured additional funding and expanded their operations.
- **Innovation through creativity:** Creative grants enabled artists, performers, and writers to use their craft in service of justice and advocacy—contributing to national dialogues on health, climate, and free expression.
- **Resilience and credibility:** Open call grants provided essential validation for emerging organisations—serving as a launchpad for future growth and stronger civic presence.
- **Shared learning and solidarity:** Workshops, compliance support, and learning exchanges have built a culture of mutual support across our partner network, helping organisations share strategies and grow stronger together.

Together, these investments have helped catalyse civic action, increase civil society influence, and strengthen participatory governance across the Commonwealth.

Grant partner, Civil Society Network on Climate Change, leading a workshop on climate advocacy in Malawi



Grant-making: what we have learned

- **Inclusion requires intention:** Proactive outreach, simplified processes, and tailored support mechanisms are essential to reach smaller and less-resourced organisations, especially in small and vulnerable states. Our capacity strengthening stream has been vital to achieving this—enabling us to connect with partners that were unsuccessful in our competitive open call or overlooked by other funding sources and to expand our reach to underrepresented countries in the Commonwealth.
- **Different organisations need different kinds of support:** Smaller and newer partners benefit from one-on-one mentoring, compliance workshops, and support in budgeting and financial management. These highly targeted investments have yielded strong results—not just in project delivery, but in strengthening the long-term sustainability and visibility of our partners, many of whom have used their newly-acquired skills attract further funding.
- **Creative expression is a powerful driver of change:** Our creative grants and artistic components of open call projects have shown that storytelling, performance, and visual arts can amplify marginalised voices, drive civic engagement, and influence policy in distinctive and durable ways.
- **Simplicity enhances equity:** Streamlining application and reporting requirements made it easier for first-time applicants and grassroots groups to engage with our grants programme. Working with smaller organisations has also shown the importance of being highly responsive and flexible in our approach.
- **Increased demand must be matched with strategic choices:** Surging applications reflect trust in our model—but also highlight the need for adequate resourcing, careful design, and ongoing innovation in grant making.

We learned that effective grant making goes beyond funding—it requires thoughtful design, tailored support, and a focus on strengthening organisational capacity. Expanding access and simplifying processes have widened our reach and impact, but sustaining this success will require strategic focus and continued investment.

‘Inclusion requires intention: Proactive outreach, simplified processes, and tailored support mechanisms are essential to reach smaller and less-resourced organisations.’

Looking ahead

To build on the success of the grants programme, the Foundation should continue to use differentiated support models tailored to organisational size, maturity, and context. Expanding creative components across all grant streams—particularly in public health, climate resilience, and civic dialogue—could further amplify impact. Future efforts might also focus on forging partnerships with like minded organisations. As demand grows, the Foundation will need to balance ambition with sustainability by exploring innovative use of technology, scaling mechanisms, and co-funding models to preserve accessibility while maintaining quality.

‘Effective grant making goes beyond funding—it requires thoughtful design, tailored support, and a focus on strengthening organisational capacity. Expanding access and simplifying processes have widened our reach and impact, but sustaining this success will require strategic focus and continued investment.’

Grant partner, Eco-Sud, using capacity strengthening funding to protect natural ecosystems in Mauritius



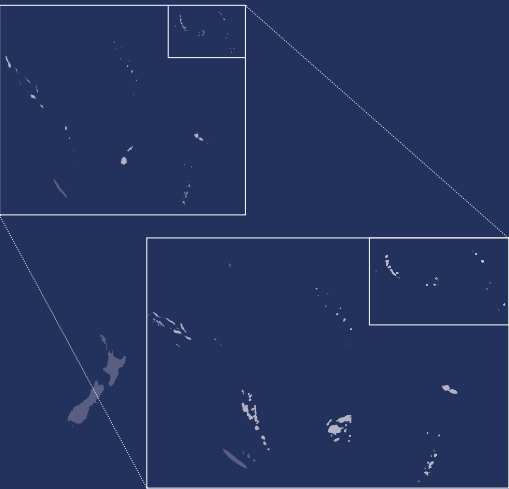
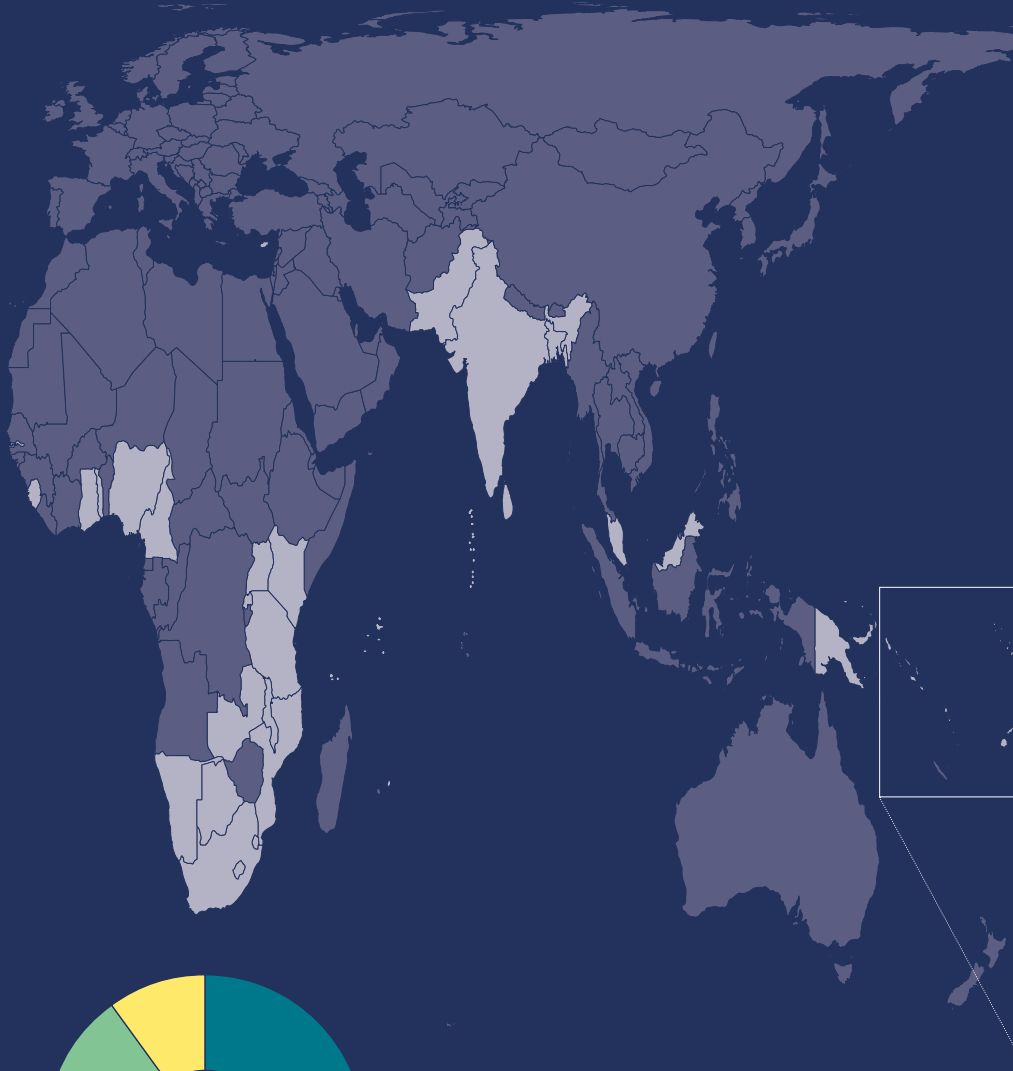
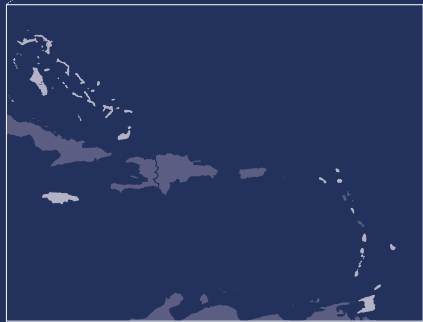
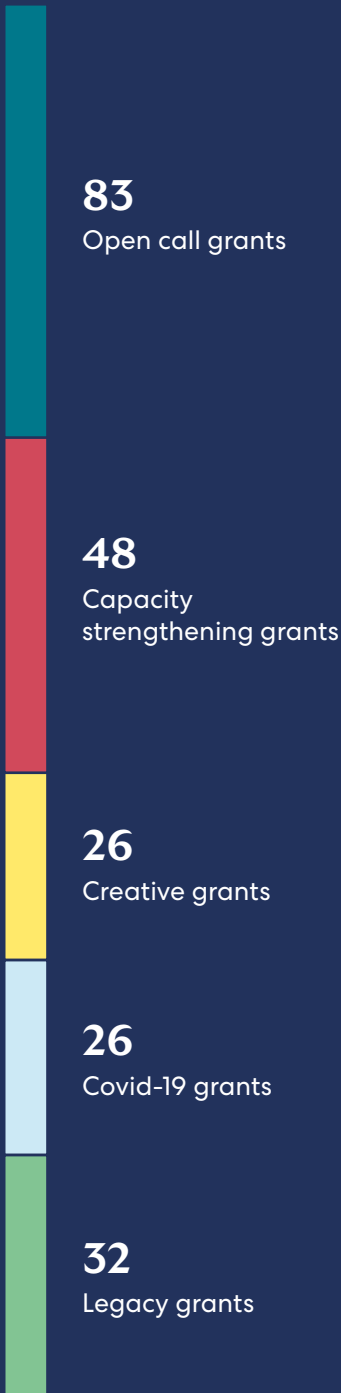
Global grants overview

216 civil society organisations.
215 projects. 48 member countries.

Read more about our grants projects during this strategic period on our website.



215 projects



Case study

Helping civil society to work with government (Guyana, Rwanda, and Saint Christopher and Nevis)

Key result:



Partner capacity



Civil society voice



Policy-maker responsiveness



Policy change

Independent evaluator
statement:



‘Recent grants from the Commonwealth Foundation have led to significant changes in the capacity of three civil society organisations: Policy Forum Guyana, Biodiversity Conservation Organization (BIOCOOR) in Rwanda, and Lake Health and Wellbeing in Saint Christopher and Nevis. With targeted support for capacity-building—ranging from digital communications and strategic planning to alliance-building and policy training—these organisations moved beyond isolated, community-level actions to a place where they could shape national conversations and influence policy agendas. The Foundation’s contribution was pivotal in helping each organisation overcome structural limitations and amplify its influence.’

In Guyana, Rwanda, and Saint Christopher and Nevis, civil society organisations often operate under significant constraints. Common challenges include fragmented networks, limited access to policy platforms, under-developed communications capacity, and under-resourced internal systems. Despite these barriers, momentum is growing—there are emerging opportunities for advocacy, increased youth engagement, and new spaces for dialogue. Yet many organisations lack the institutional scaffolding to take full advantage of these developments.

Three organisations supported by the Commonwealth Foundation identified tailored pathways to strengthen their strategic presence and long-term impact. Policy Forum Guyana recognised that its ‘One Point Five Degrees Celsius’ lifestyle campaign could gain national traction if supported by stronger content and more dynamic digital outreach. In Rwanda, the Biodiversity Conservation Organisation (BIOCOOR) recognised the need to transition from delivering community-level programmes to engaging in high-level policy dialogue—requiring stronger governance and leadership capacity. In Saint Christopher and Nevis, Lake Health and Wellbeing aimed to unify a fragmented civil society sector into a national alliance capable of influencing policy on non-communicable diseases.

The Foundation’s contribution went beyond financial assistance: opening critical entry points for long-term institutional development. In Guyana, the grant supported a six-month training programme in communications, digital content production, and media strategy. This led to the creation of animations, influencer kits, and education materials that transformed public engagement. These tools helped secure memoranda of understanding with the Ministries of Education and Natural Resources to embed environmental education in the national curriculum. The grant partner also formed partnerships with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and regional youth climate networks.



Grant partner Policy Forum Guyana delivering the ‘One Point Five Degrees Celsius’ lifestyle campaign

April 2023

Policy Forum Guyana builds digital capacity, boosting visibility and securing MOUs with national ministries.

July 2023

BIOCOOR undertakes governance reform and staff training, shifting from service delivery to strategic advocacy.

October 2023

Lake Health and Wellbeing formalises the SKN NCD Alliance and begins high-level policy engagement.

December 2023

All three partners report stronger advocacy, inclusive participation, and improved internal monitoring and planning systems.

‘We have seen increased visibility, which resulted in partnerships with UNICEF and the Women and Gender Equality Commission—they approached us, and that had never happened before.’

Grants partner (independent interview)

In Rwanda, early feedback from the Foundation helped BIOCOOR identify and address structural weaknesses that were limiting its ability to influence change. The organisation then secured funding for institutional strengthening, which enabled board training, clarified roles, and improved strategic planning. These reforms positioned BIOCOOR to confidently participate in policy forums on climate justice and biodiversity. Its visibility improved, additional donors engaged, and two new centres were established to support youth leadership in sustainability.

Foundation support enabled Lake Health and Wellbeing to launch the Saint Christopher and Nevis Non-Communicable Diseases Alliance. Funding covered staffing, training, and advocacy planning. The Alliance engaged with the Office of the Prime Minister and participated in a national health conference. It also contributed to disability policy reform and led campaigns on the dangers of sugar-sweetened beverages.

‘We never considered ourselves an advocacy organisation. After the Commonwealth Foundation grant, we now engage confidently in policy advocacy and dialogue with decision-makers around biodiversity conservation.’

Grants partner (independent interview)

Across all three countries, partners reported strengthened capacity not only in advocacy and communications but also in organisational learning. Even where training in monitoring and evaluation was limited, the Foundation’s reporting process encouraged structured reflection and learning—laying the groundwork for deeper policy influence and future growth.

‘Because of the grant, we were able to form the Saint Kitts and Nevis NCD Alliance, which we had struggled to do before. It’s been fulfilling personally, organisationally, and also for the NGOs involved.’

Grants partner (independent interview)

Policy Forum Guyana



Read the
full report
here:



Unlocking Commonwealth creativity

Commonwealth Short Story Prize

The Commonwealth Short Story Prize has cemented its place as one of the world’s leading literary awards, unearthing and elevating exceptional talent from across the Commonwealth. Over the past five years, the prize has grown in profile and reach, providing a powerful platform for new and emerging voices.

Results 2021–2026

36,458

The number of stories entered for the prize during the strategy period.

68%

The proportion of Commonwealth Small Island and Vulnerable States that have entered more stories during the strategic period than ever before.

Extending reach and visibility

Since 2020, we have celebrated our winners with an online award ceremony, significantly enhancing our capacity to broaden the reach of the prize. The 2025 event, presented by Rwandan performing artist and storyteller, Malaika Uwamahoro, drew a live audience of over 900 people with a further 6,500 views across the Commonwealth—far surpassing previous years. This global reach reflects the growing influence of the prize as a showcase for diverse storytelling.

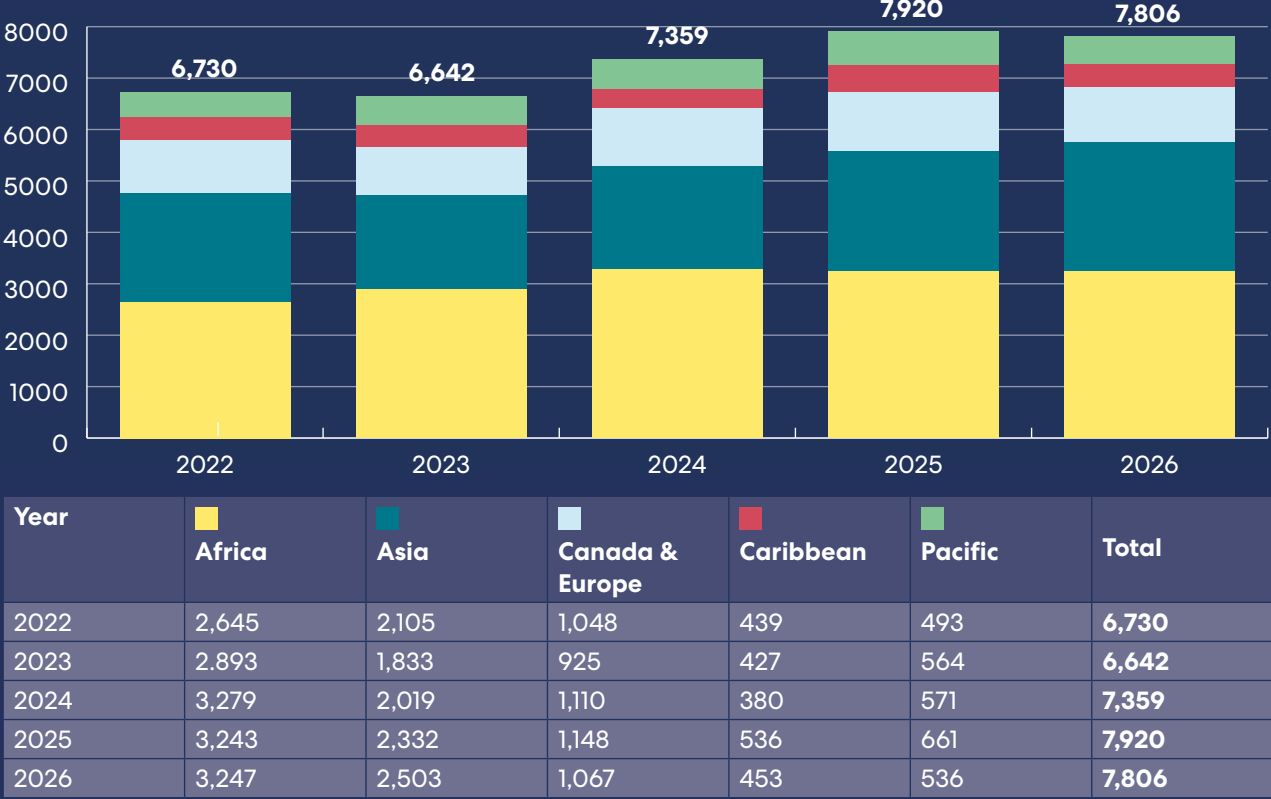
Entries have also increased dramatically. In 2022, the prize received 6,730 entries from 52 Commonwealth countries; a record that was broken the following year with 7,359 entries from 53 countries. The trend continued into 2026, with 54 countries represented by the 7,806 entries and a record number of submissions from 12 countries. The Foundation’s targeted outreach has paid off: helping to ensure that talented writers from small and vulnerable Member States—particularly in underrepresented regions such as the Caribbean and the Pacific—have the confidence and opportunity to participate.

Championing diverse voices

The Commonwealth Short Story Prize is the most linguistically diverse of all major literary awards. We accept entries in 12 languages other than English (Creole and Maltese were added during the reporting period). We also accept stories translated into English from any language and ensure public recognition for the translator of any translated story that wins at regional level.

Over the past five years the prize has continued to spotlight remarkable stories and provide a launchpad for literary success. The 2022 prize was won by **Ntsika Kota from Eswatini** for his story ‘and the earth drank deep.’ In a record year for entries, Ntsika became the first writer from his country to be shortlisted and the second overall winner from Africa. Following his win,

Commonwealth Short Story Prize entries 2021–2026



Ntsika participated in the George Town Literary Festival in Malaysia and was interviewed by Booker Prize winner Damon Galgut—experiences that established his standing as a rising literary star.

The 2023 prize was awarded to **Kwame McPherson from Jamaica** for ‘Ocoee,’ a story that interweaves Caribbean folklore and African-American history. Kwame’s win was a breakthrough moment for Jamaican literature and elevated his profile internationally. He was invited to meet the Jamaican Foreign Minister at her residence and, later, he attended the award ceremony of the Queen’s Commonwealth Essay Competition at Buckingham Palace—testament to the recognition and opportunities that the prize can generate.

The 2024 winner, **Sanjana Thakur from India**, won for ‘Aishwarya Rai,’ a reimagining of the traditional adoption story set in Mumbai. Her fresh perspective resonated globally, underscoring the prize’s capacity to bring lesser-heard stories to a wider audience. Sanjana’s success—she has appeared in over 100 news articles since entering the prize—has given her a firm basis on which to start her writing career.

The 2025 prize was won by **Canadian Vincentian writer, Chanel Sutherland** for ‘Descend’, a story that hears slaves sharing stories in the darkness of a sinking ship. The story was bold in form, precise in detail and

affirmed the unrivalled power of storytelling to set our spirits free and find hope where none exists.

Supporting writers beyond the prize

The Foundation’s role extends beyond awarding the prize; we are firmly committed to nurturing talent and building confidence among aspiring writers across the Commonwealth. Over the past five years, we have adapted our outreach and support to address the barriers faced by emerging writers.

- The pre-entry campaigns focused on instilling confidence in prospective entrants by offering practical writing and editing tips from previous winners and creative writing experts.
- Professional video presentations produced for all winners—filmed on location showing them in their writing context—have helped them reach broader audiences and build their portfolio and public profiles.
- The Foundation’s partnership with *Granta* provides winning writers with a prestigious online publishing platform for their stories.

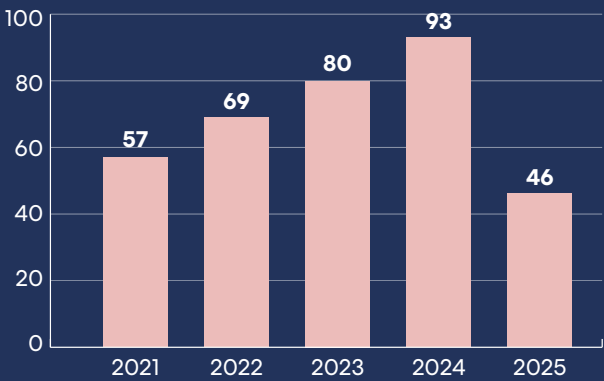
Our impact through the prize

The Commonwealth Short Story Prize has become a powerful platform for emerging voices and a launchpad for literary success:

- **Expanded reach:** Entry numbers have grown steadily, with a record 54 countries represented by the 7,806 entries received in 2026 and increased participation from small and vulnerable states.
- **Career development:** Winners and finalists have gained greater visibility, leading to new opportunities such as literary festival invitations, book deals, and media coverage.
- **Amplified voices:** Winning stories published by *Granta* and professionally produced video presentations of the winners have brought outstanding Commonwealth literary talent to a truly global audience.
- **Creative influence:** The prize has nurtured new perspectives and inspired creative expression, helping writers explore themes such as identity, social justice, and cultural heritage.
- **Strengthened networks:** a connected and supportive literary community has evolved around the prize, with past winners and judges contributing to its ongoing success.

The Commonwealth Short Story Prize is not just a prestigious literary award: it has evolved into a springboard for talent, empowering writers to share their stories with the world and inspiring future generations to do the same. The Prize has strengthened the creative landscape across the Commonwealth, fostering a more connected and influential literary community.

Number of media stories on the prize (Commonwealth-wide)



‘The Commonwealth Short Story Prize continues to serve as a catalyst for new talent, reminding us that while the world may be vast and its challenges many, the act of storytelling remains a singular means of understanding and inspiring change.’

Roger A. Agana, NewsGhana

Commonwealth Short Story Prize: what we have learned

- **Targeted outreach is key:** Focused efforts to reach underrepresented regions—particularly by using social media advertising—can successfully broaden participation in small and vulnerable states.
- **Confidence-building matters:** Pre-entry campaigns offering writing and editing tips encourage more aspiring writers to submit their work, especially from regions with historically low participation.
- **Creative communities drive success:** The growing influence of the prize reflects the strength of Commonwealth literary networks. Support from past winners, judges, and creative networks boosts the prize’s credibility and reach.
- **Sustaining quality requires strategic focus:** Rising entry numbers reflect growing demand but also place pressure on the judging process. While streamlining and enhancing the review system and increasing reader capacity will be key to maintaining high standards, we may need to consider additional options in the years ahead.

We learned that building a truly inclusive literary platform requires more than increasing participation—it demands strategic outreach, tailored support, and strong networks. The success of the prize reflects both the depth of talent across the Commonwealth and the strength of the creative community supporting it.

Looking ahead

The continuing success of the prize brings both exciting opportunities and practical challenges. We are delighted to have engaged with so many emerging writers from across the Commonwealth; however, the sharp rise in submissions places increased pressure on our review and selection processes.

The Foundation is committed to ensuring that this growth does not compromise the quality of our engagement with writers or the integrity of the judging process. Some measures—such as refining the judging portal and expanding the pool of first-round readers—are already in place. Looking ahead, we will carefully consider sustainability in the context of the next strategic plan.

‘More often than not, the creativity expressed in the [prize] submissions stirs debate on pressing social issues and helps others to better understand them from another perspective.’

Janine Mendes-Franco, Global Voices

Ntsika Kota speaking at the 2022 George Town Literary Festival in Penang, Malaysia © George Town Literary Festival



Case study

Strengthening and amplifying the voice of Commonwealth writers

Key result:



Partner capacity



Civil society voice



Policy-maker responsiveness



Policy change

Independent evaluator statement:



‘The Short Story Prize has contributed significantly to expanding the literary landscape in Commonwealth countries by creating opportunities for emerging writers to enhance their storytelling abilities and broaden their audience reach. The prize’s prestigious platform, combined with the Foundation’s support on general writing tips and digital outreach—delivered through website content, mailshots, and social media—creates an environment that nurtures craft development and enables emerging writers to express their authentic voice. By amplifying voices that are often marginalised and by fostering creative expression rooted in diverse cultural realities, the prize strengthens collective identity and awareness, contributing to a more balanced global cultural discourse that resists cultural homogenisation and promotes plurality in storytelling traditions.’



Cosmata Lindie, Guyana, shortlisted in 2023 for her story ‘Where the Winds Blow’

Since its inception in 2012, the Commonwealth Short Story Prize has become a flagship initiative, celebrating literary talent and diversity across the Commonwealth’s 56 member countries. More than a competition, the prize nurtures critical capacity among writers—particularly those from smaller countries and marginalised communities—helping them to hone their craft, gain professional exposure, and amplify their voices in local, regional, and global spaces.

At the heart of the initiative is its contribution to personal and professional growth. Writers consistently describe the prize as transformative. While only a small group of shortlisted entrants and winners access structured capacity-building—such as mentoring or editorial support—the broader submission process offers a pathway of learning and growth in itself. Writers report that preparing work for the prize prompted improvements in storytelling, language use, and the integration of local idioms or dialects. In doing so, many were able to surface powerful narratives that reflect the realities of their world, while building confidence in their creative identity. The broad appeal of the prize has meant that perspectives which do not often find a platform—including those of women, young people, indigenous communities and writers from small and vulnerable states—are strongly represented.

The prize plays a catalytic role beyond the individual. Writers note that recognition through the prize—whether shortlisted, regional, or overall winner—opens doors to agents, publishers, cultural platforms, and academic institutions. These networks

‘Being shortlisted for such a prestigious prize defines you for the rest of your life; it raises your profile in a way that opens doors for you.’

Participating stakeholder (independent interview)

May 2022

Kritika Pandey’s winning story published in *A Case of Indian Marvels* anthology. Her story addresses anti-Muslim prejudice and continues to spark critical civil society dialogue.

May 2023

Kwame McPherson wins after seven attempts; media exposure and recognition lead to diplomatic engagements and literary honours in Jamaica.

May 2024

Kevin Jared Hosein’s *Hungry Ghosts* wins Walter Scott Prize, validating long-term career impact of Prize platform.

often spark new opportunities for publication, partnership, and public engagement, magnifying the reach and resonance of their stories. In this way, the prize serves as a cultural amplifier: elevating voices from the margins and contributing to wider conversations on literature, identity, and justice.

Visibility gained through the prize has led to media engagements, invitations to conferences and festivals, and university collaborations. While few writers directly enter policy spaces, many have found their work intersecting with public dialogue on issues such as gender inequality, colonial legacies, poverty, and climate justice. Their creative narratives, rooted in experience, increasingly function as informal advocacy—bridging the personal and the political in ways that challenge dominant narratives and broaden public understanding.

In sum, the Commonwealth Short Story Prize has proven to be a powerful mechanism for nurturing an inclusive literary landscape. Its accessible, global format enables writers from right across the Commonwealth to develop their voice, connect with professional networks, and bring fresh—sometimes challenging—perspectives into public view. This accessibility, which makes the prize unique, has strengthened under the current strategy due to deeper and wider outreach, the addition of more submission languages, and the investment of resources in building the skills and confidence of potential entrants.



Mary Rokonadravu, Fiji, 2022 regional winner for her story ‘The Nightwatch’

There is certainly room to enhance impact. Accessibility can always be improved. And further inquiry is needed to assess ways in which the Foundation could better leverage the prize for its broader advocacy goals. With expanded capacity-building and a more systematic approach to tracking civic outcomes, the prize might serve as a stronger bridge between creative expression and civil society voice—supporting systemic change through literature and storytelling.

‘The prize has allowed voices that might have remained unknown to finally be heard; it creates a ripple effect where even the smallest local narrative can reach international audiences.’

Participating stakeholder (independent interview)

Kevin Jared Hosein, Trinidad and Tobago, 2018 winner for his story ‘Passage’, © Mark Lyndersay



Read the full report [here:](#)



Creativity for change

Creativity lies at the heart of the Foundation’s work. Our creative grants have provided direct support to artists and creative organisations working at the intersection of art and social change, while the Commonwealth Short Story Prize has championed aspiring writers across every region of the Commonwealth.

We have deepened our commitment to harnessing the power of art and creative expression to drive meaningful change. Through literature, film, performance, and visual art, our creative programmes have amplified diverse voices, connected communities, and inspired collective action across our areas of focus.

The Foundation’s belief in the power of creativity is rooted in our understanding that stories and artistic expression can shift perspectives, foster understanding, and mobilise communities in ways that traditional advocacy cannot. Creative expression nurtures an emotional engagement with audiences—changing hearts as well as minds—helping to build a more connected Commonwealth.

‘Creativity offers us a mechanism for resilience, resistance and expression, in a very volatile world. We hope that through our creative programming and initiatives such as the Commonwealth Quilt, we can inspire collective creativity across the Commonwealth to empower communities and encourage artistic expression.’

Ms Razmi Farook, Director-General, Commonwealth Foundation

Creativity as a tool for advocacy

In 2023, we merged our Advocacy and Creative workstreams, recognising that creative expression can be a powerful tool for influencing public opinion and shaping policy. This strategic shift has allowed us to integrate creative work more fully into our broader mission of advancing democratic values, equality, and social justice.

- **Climate justice through art:** Our 2024 partnership with the Women of the World (WOW) Festival saw Namibian artist and climate activist Ina Maria Shikongo commissioned to produce artwork highlighting the stories of women and girls in the fight for climate justice.
- **Amplifying diverse voices through translation:** Our collaboration with the Singapore Book Council has supported dialogues on translation and creative expression, ensuring that stories from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds reach a wider audience.
- **Exploring colonial legacies:** Our 2023 partnership with Guyana Speaks marked the 200th anniversary of the Demerara Rebellion, using creative storytelling to explore the legacy of colonialism and its ongoing impact on Guyanese society.

- **Creative integration at the People’s Forum:** Spoken word, film, and visual art played a central role in shaping conversations and deepening engagement with complex global issues, transforming the Forum into a dynamic and emotionally resonant platform for dialogue and change.
- **Creative advocacy through Critical Conversations:** Our 2025 roundtable, Together We Thrive: Culture and Creativity in Advocacy Across the Commonwealth, explored the transformative role of creative advocacy in driving social and political change. This session highlighted the growing recognition of artistic expression as a powerful tool for justice and reform across the Commonwealth.

In March 2026, we launched the **Commonwealth Quilt**, inviting Commonwealth citizens to add their own ‘thread’ to compliment the inspiring words of the Commonwealth Poet Laureate that begin, ‘Together — piece by piece by peace — we are one. But a quilt is never done.’ A collective digital tapestry will be curated from the entries, with the final selection exhibited at the People’s Forum 2026 in Antigua and Barbuda.

Expanding platforms for creative expression

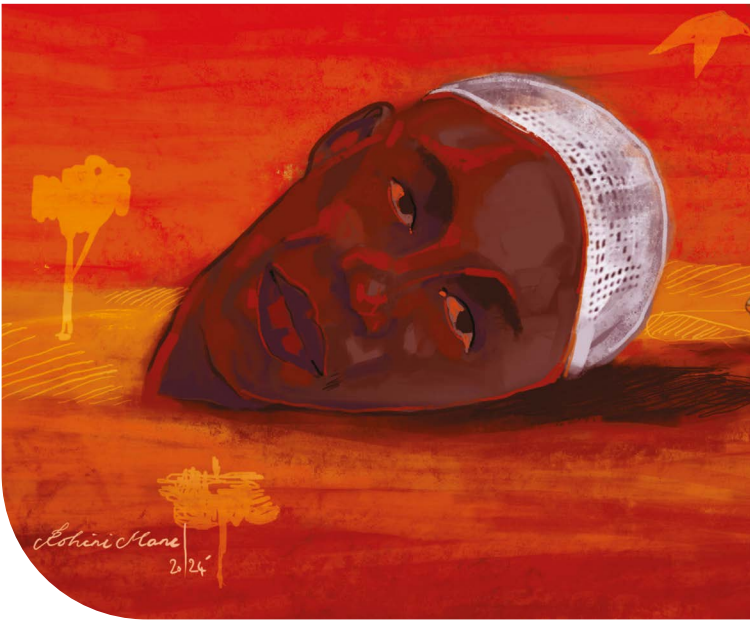
Our flagship creative platform, **adda**, has evolved into a dynamic space for emerging and established writers from across the Commonwealth. Since its launch, **adda** has published fiction, non-fiction, and poetry in multiple languages, offering a platform for stories that might otherwise go untold. With well over 700,000 visitors over the past five years, **adda** has significantly broadened its scope and influence:

- **Spoken word and performance poetry:** In 2024, **adda** launched its first spoken word and performance poetry series, attracting over 1,500 submissions from 47 Commonwealth countries, including 225 spoken word entries. The series marked a new chapter for **adda**, highlighting the creative power of oral storytelling.
- **Short Story Prize publications:** Every year, **adda** publishes the shortlisted stories from the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, ensuring that the work of talented emerging writers is accessible to a global audience. In 2025 alone, 20 shortlisted stories were published over four issues.
- **Themed collections on contemporary issues:** Collections such as ‘Remember to Rest’ (mental health, indigenous medicine, and medical neglect), ‘Speak OUT!’ (freedom of expression, censorship, and identity) and ‘Island Writings’ (lesser-heard narratives, diverse perspectives) have provided a creative lens through which to engage a wide range of audiences—including Commonwealth Ministers—on complex social and political issues.
- **Linguistic diversity:** The ‘Africa in Translation’ collection, published in 2025, features works in a range of African languages alongside English translations, further broadening access and representation.



Ina Maria Shikongo at the 2024 Women of the World Festival, United Kingdom © Chris Payne

Illustration by Rohini Mani for ‘Vermillion’ by Abduljalal Musa Aliyu, published on **adda**



In recent years, the Foundation has supported emerging filmmakers through the **Caribbean Voices** initiative, which aimed to strengthen film infrastructure and amplify underrepresented voices in the region. Seven short films were produced, tackling themes such as dementia, LGBTQ+ identity, indigenous culture, and the climate crisis.

Notably, *Eating Pawpaw on the Seashore* by Rae Wiltshire from Guyana was selected by the British Film Institute for screening at BFI Flare: London LGBTQIA+ Film Festival and promoted internationally through the British Council’s network. This recognition underscores how the Foundation’s creative support helps artists reach wider audiences and engage in critical global conversations.

Through these initiatives, the Foundation has established platforms where artists and storytellers can share their work, build confidence, and engage global audiences. This work has been particularly valuable for creatives from small and vulnerable states, whose voices often struggle to find space in the mainstream cultural landscape.

‘Getting a grant from the Foundation gave me hope that I can make films at home and celebrate Guyanese stories. I have continued to share my knowledge and have even started productions on other Guyanese films because I want to give back because someone has helped me.’

Rae Wiltshire, Guyana, filmmaker

Leveraging creativity: our impact

Over the past five years, the Foundation has strengthened the creative infrastructure of the Commonwealth and empowered artists and storytellers to share their work on a global stage.

- **Expanded creative output:** *adda* has published more work from more countries than ever before, following intensified outreach campaigns.
- **Elevated visibility for artists:** Winners and contributors have gained international recognition, leading to invitations to literary festivals, media coverage, and publishing opportunities.
- **Strengthened creative networks:** Partnerships and collaborative events have led to a more connected and supportive creative community across the Commonwealth.
- **Shaping public discourse:** Creative projects supported by the Foundation have tackled issues like climate justice, freedom of expression, and colonial legacies; contributing to policy conversations and shifting public narratives.
- **Empowering smaller and vulnerable states:** Tailored support has amplified voices from small and vulnerable states, ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented on global platforms.
- **Creative integration into global events:** Incorporating creative expression into the 2022 and 2024 Commonwealth People’s Forums has enhanced impact and engagement.
- **Reinforcing the role of art as a tool driving social change:** Creative storytelling and performance have become a defining feature of the Foundation’s *Critical Conversations* event series, creating a more enabling environment for meaningful dialogue on complex global issues.

Our creative work has not only showcased talent—it has inspired action, strengthened communities, and helped shape more inclusive and engaged societies across the Commonwealth.

Results 2021–2026

21,463

The number of people who registered for our events exploring the role of creative expression in advocacy.

643,397

The number of unique visitors to our online magazine, *adda*.

Commonwealth Poet Laureate, Selina Tusitala Marsh, reciting her poem ‘Five Fingers, One Hand’ at the 2025 High Commissioners’ Festive Poetry Evening



Creativity for change: what we have learned

- **Broader outreach strengthens diversity:** Targeted efforts to reach underrepresented regions expand participation, particularly from small and vulnerable states, enriching the range of voices in our creative programmes.
- **Visibility fuels confidence:** For many artists and writers, having their work published or showcased not only increases recognition but also opens doors to new opportunities and creative growth.
- **Strategic partnerships extend reach:** Collaborations with festivals, literary organisations, and translation platforms expands the influence and visibility of our creative work, connecting artists with new audiences and networks.
- **Creative advocacy drives engagement:** Integrating creative expression into advocacy deepens public engagement with complex issues, creating more accessible and emotionally resonant entry points for difficult conversations.

We learned that our creative programming goes beyond giving artists a platform—it builds confidence, strengthens networks, drives meaningful dialogue and has intensified the impact of our broader advocacy and engagement.

‘Our creative programming builds confidence, strengthens networks, drives meaningful dialogue and has intensified the impact of our broader advocacy and engagement.’

Commonwealth Poet Laureate

Poetry has played a quietly powerful role in our work throughout the strategic period. From the annual High Commissioners’ Festive Poetry evenings to our widely shared Commonwealth Day videos; poetry has offered a way to connect, to persuade, and to inspire. Out of this legacy emerged the Commonwealth Poet Laureate—an honorary position that serves as a living affirmation of our belief in the transformative power of creative expression. It speaks to our enduring commitment to creativity as a force for positive change, and to the unique capacity of poetry to connect hearts, challenge assumptions, and awaken imagination.

On 1 July 2025, the Foundation was honoured to announce Selina Tusitala Marsh as the inaugural Commonwealth Poet Laureate. An acclaimed poet from the Pacific, Selina gives a powerful voice to themes of identity, justice, and belonging. She has been a valued collaborator with the Foundation for several years, co-hosting the 2024 People’s Forum and the 2025 Commonwealth Short Story Prize ceremony. Her poetry was the inspiration for the 2025 Commonwealth Day video, which was viewed over 1.6 million times during Commonwealth Week.

The announcement was accompanied by the establishment of a new dedicated Commonwealth Poet Laureate collection on the Foundation’s online magazine, *adda*, and the publication of Professor Marsh’s inaugural poem, ‘Uncommon Banyan’. More broadly, the Commonwealth Poet Laureate will help to integrate the voices of the people of the Commonwealth more fully into our work. In establishing this role, we affirm that culture is not a flourish at the margins, but a vital force at the heart of a fairer, more inclusive Commonwealth.

Case study

Empowering community voice and collaboration: creative spaces in Tonga and Eswatini

Key result:



Partner capacity



Civil society voice



Policy-maker responsiveness



Policy change

Independent evaluator statement:



‘Two projects supported by the Commonwealth Foundation— Seleka International’s mural initiative in Tonga (Pacific) and Yebo Artreach’s ‘Yini Loku’ creative hub in Eswatini (Africa)—demonstrate how flexible funding can transform how communities perceive and engage with creative expression. In both contexts, Foundation funding enabled local organisations to establish inclusive spaces that energised civic dialogue, elevated marginalised voices, fostered gender equality, cultivated intergenerational engagement, and redefined public infrastructure as sites of cultural pride and social engagement. By removing financial and logistical barriers, the Foundation’s support catalysed two impactful projects that demonstrate how artistic expression can be a powerful tool for civic engagement and social change, especially in small and vulnerable states.’

In Tonga and Eswatini, the Commonwealth Foundation enabled local organisations to reimagine public space and transform creative expression into civic participation. In both contexts, civil society actors faced limited access to safe, inclusive, and affordable spaces for collaboration. In Tonga, opportunities for cultural participation were further constrained after a volcanic eruption and tsunami in 2022 that damaged buildings and curtailed already scarce investment in public art. In Eswatini, youth-led and community initiatives lacked dedicated venues to connect, organise, or engage creatively. In each case, the Foundation’s flexible grant making unlocked the potential for grassroots-led creative infrastructure—ensuring that marginalised communities, including young people and women, could shape cultural narratives and civic dialogue.

In Tonga, Seleka International led a community mural project that converted storm-battered walls into vibrant public artworks. With support from the Foundation, Seleka covered critical costs such as paint, logistics, and equipment. The initiative produced 19 large-scale murals, many co-created with local young people and schoolchildren. Alongside technical training, the project created new opportunities for women to lead creative processes in public, challenging gendered assumptions about this art form. The artworks reflected local histories, aspirations, and cultural values; turning neglected surfaces into platforms for community identity and dialogue.

‘For the girls, it was probably the hardest, because painting on the roadside challenged the notion that mural painting is a “masculine” job – we really tried to break that mindset and give them the same opportunity.’

Grant partner (independent interview)



A mural in Tonga, created by grant partner, Seleka International

August 2022

Seleka International and Yebo Artreach begin planning creative initiatives to revitalise public spaces and engage communities.

January 2023

Commonwealth Foundation grants awarded; Seleka launches mural campaign, Yebo establishes Yini Loku creative hub in Mbabane.

June 2023

Community engagement peaks: 19 murals completed in Tonga; Yini Loku hosts youth events, exhibitions, and strategy sessions.

February 2024

Projects gain international visibility with invitations to residencies, regional collaborations, and diplomatic endorsements.

In Eswatini, the Foundation’s grant enabled Yebo Artreach to establish Yini Loku—a creative hub in the capital city, Mbabane. By covering essential costs such as rent, utilities, and internet access, the grant allowed the team to focus on building a programme of work that was genuinely inclusive. Over 12 months, Yini Loku became a trusted gathering space for artists, activists, and grassroots movements. Partner groups such as Hlumisa, the Eswatini Climate Coalition, and the Vukubone Soundlab used the venue for exhibitions, community discussions, and collaborative performances. The hub also hosted open mic nights and advocacy planning sessions, creating space for civil society engagement at the intersection of arts, rights, and environmental justice.

Both projects generated ripple effects beyond their original scope. In Tonga, the mural campaign shifted public attitudes toward the role of public art in society. Community members began suggesting new sites and requesting murals for schools and public institutions. In Eswatini, Yini Loku attracted regional and diplomatic interest, expanding its reach to neighbouring countries; the credibility and flexibility of the Foundation’s grant was pivotal in attracting new partnerships and securing additional funding from the European Union and the German Embassy.

These outcomes underscore the value of supporting creative, inclusive spaces for expression. Flexible core funding enabled both organisations to prioritise inclusion, adapt to local contexts, and pursue their long-term visions. By fostering cultural infrastructure that focuses on community voice, the Foundation helped create the conditions for a culture of greater civic engagement and dialogue to take root—opening pathways for creative expression to inform policy, amplify marginalised voices, and strengthen participatory governance across the Commonwealth.

‘The contribution from the Commonwealth Foundation has helped to make a difference, to amplify the voices of the civil society, of local creatives, and of maybe the marginalised, the youth or the women in the local region.’

Grant partner (independent interview)



Above and right: performances and workshops at Yini Loku in Mbabane, Eswatini, organised by creative grant partner, Yebo ArtReach



Read the full report here:



A Foundation for the future

Our governance, our strength

Over the past five years, the Foundation has made it a priority to strengthen our relationship with governors, recognising that our **Member States** are the owners and custodians of this organisation and ultimately responsible for its long-term success. Our approach has been grounded in the principles of **transparency, accountability, and engagement**—ensuring that governors are well-informed, actively involved, and empowered to shape the Foundation’s future direction.

Strengthening communication and engagement

We have worked consistently to keep governors informed through clear, accessible reporting, regular updates, and structured opportunities for dialogue. This includes detailed briefings for members of the **Grants Committee** and **Executive Committee** ahead of each meeting, as well as bi-monthly informal updates from the Director-General to the Chairs of our three governance bodies.

Governors have also played a vital role in amplifying the Foundation’s reach and visibility. Their active promotion of Foundation initiatives—particularly through their own networks—has contributed to broader engagement in our **grants programme** and the **Commonwealth Short Story Prize**, with a notable rise in submissions from smaller and more vulnerable Commonwealth countries.

We have ensured strong governor representation at key events, including the **Commonwealth People’s Forum** and the **public debate between candidates for Commonwealth Secretary-General**. These moments of direct engagement have helped bridge governance and programme delivery, deepening governors’ sense of ownership and reinforcing their role at the heart of the Foundation.

Achieving universal membership

The drive toward universal membership has been a defining feature of the Foundation’s governance over this period. In 2021, the Director-General launched an ambitious initiative to bring into the Foundation those Commonwealth countries that were not yet members. The approach combined direct engagement with High Commissioners of non-Member States and strategic support from existing governors who were encouraged to actively advocated the benefits of Foundation membership.

Over the past five years, High Commissioners of non-Member States have been routinely invited to all Foundation events, including the **High Commissioners’ Festive Poetry Evening** and the *Critical Conversations* event series. Non-Member States also receive full documentation for the Foundation’s annual Board of Governors meeting and are invited to participate as observers—a move that has strengthened relationships and encouraged greater interest in membership.

This strategy has paid off: over the reporting period, five Commonwealth countries—**Gabon, The Gambia, Maldives, Saint Christopher and Nevis, and Samoa**—joined or rejoined the Foundation, bringing the total membership to 51. In late 2024, formal invitations to join were sent to Fiji, Nauru, Singapore, Togo, and Tuvalu, with several expressing an in-principle commitment. Most recently, the Chair of the Foundation and Director-General met with the Foreign Minister of Fiji while attending the Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting in February 2026, and we hope for further growth in membership soon.

High Commissioners’ Festive Poetry Evening

The High Commissioners’ Festive Poetry Evening has become one of the most cherished events on the Commonwealth calendar—a celebration of shared humanity and cultural richness through the art of poetry. Launched in 2021 to foster connection and healing after the isolation of the pandemic, this event has evolved into a powerful annual tradition that reflects the diversity and unity of the Commonwealth.

More than 109 poems have been shared over the years—some timeless classics, others original works penned by the High Commissioners themselves. The High Commissioner for Saint Christopher and Nevis, **Dr Kevin M Isaac**, led the way on this front, regularly contributing original poems that capture the spirit of the Commonwealth.

The 2024 event at Marlborough House was particularly significant, marking the farewell of **Ambassador Sudha Devi K.R. Vasudevan** as Chair of the Board of Governors. Hosted in partnership with the High Commission of Malaysia, the evening’s theme—*Journeys and Destinations*—explored the meaning of home, the search for belonging, and the shared challenges of navigating a complex world. The warmth and camaraderie in the room underscored the power of poetry to connect and heal.

Similarly, the 2025 event provided an opportunity to offer collective thanks and a warm farewell to **Mr Shem Ochola OGW** at the end of his term as Deputy Director-General, who recited his own poem specially prepared for this occasion. Hosted at the New Zealand High Commission in London, the evening was inspired by the theme, ‘the wealth of our voice’ and was introduced by the Commonwealth Poet Laureate, Selina Tusitala Marsh.

The strength of the Festive Poetry Evening lies not just in the words shared, but in the courage and generosity of those who share them. Poetry reveals something of the speaker’s inner world—offering a glimpse into their values, their history, and their heart.

What began as a simple effort to reconnect has become a defining expression of Commonwealth unity, reminding us that while we may sail in different boats, Over the past five years, the Foundation has made it a priority we are navigating the same sea.

‘We may not remember every poem, but we will always remember how they made us feel.’

Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO, Director-General, Commonwealth Foundation

His Excellency Hamish Cooper, High Commissioner for New Zealand at the 2025 High Commissioners’ Festive Poetry Evening



Governance: our impact

Refinements to the Foundation’s governance over the past five years have increased engagement, strengthened accountability, and expanded the reach and influence of the organisation.

- **Expanded membership:** Five new countries joined the Foundation, increasing total membership to 51 and reinforcing the Foundation’s identity as a truly Commonwealth-wide organisation.
- **Greater engagement from governors:** More governors are actively involved in Foundation activities, contributing to improved visibility and increased participation in key programmes such as the grants programme and the Commonwealth Short Story Prize.
- **Stronger governance structures:** Regular briefings and direct engagement with the Chairs of governance bodies have improved engagement and the efficiency and outcomes of meetings.
- **Increasing the Foundation’s profile and influence:** Participation of governors in key events, including the Commonwealth People’s Forum and the Secretary-General debate, has positioned the Foundation as a credible and influential actor within the Commonwealth.
- **Creative engagement through poetry:** The High Commissioners’ Festive Poetry Evening has become a treasured jewel in the crown of the Foundation’s work, fostering deeper personal and professional connections among governors and reinforcing the role of culture in strengthening Commonwealth unity.

The Foundation’s governance reforms have not only strengthened organisational efficiency and accountability—they have deepened engagement, increased participation, and helped build a more connected and resilient Commonwealth.

Dato’ Sudha Devi K.R. Vasudevan, H.E. Dr Fatou Bensouda, and Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO at the Board of Governors Meeting in 2024

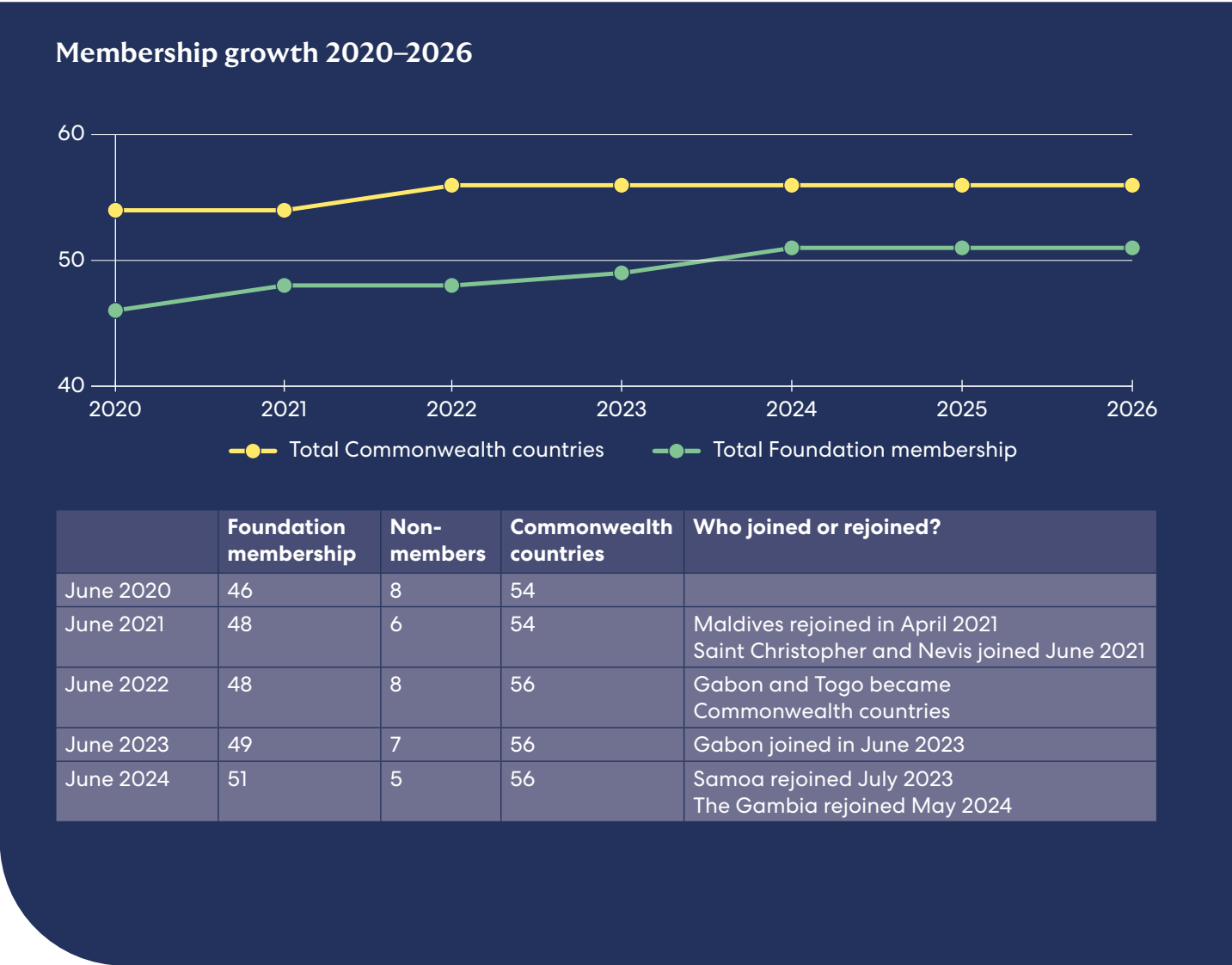


Governance: what we have learned

- **Active engagement strengthens governance:** Direct engagement with governors—through briefings, informal meetings, participation in events, and regular communication—has fostered a stronger sense of ownership and accountability.
- **Governors drive participation:** Governors have an important role to play in expanding participation in Foundation programmes, particularly in underrepresented regions.
- **Inclusivity fosters commitment:** Inviting High Commissioners from non-Member States to observe Board meetings and participate in Foundation events has strengthened relationships and encouraged membership growth.
- **Strategic outreach works:** The universal membership strategy has demonstrated that direct, sustained engagement, paired with clear communication of benefits, can drive membership growth.
- **Cultural engagement enhances connection:** The Festive Poetry Evening and similar events have deepened the sense of belonging and collective identity among governors and between governors and the Foundation.

‘Active engagement strengthens governance: Direct engagement with governors—through briefings, informal meetings, participation in events, and regular communication—has fostered a stronger sense of ownership and accountability.’

We learned that strong governance is not just about structure and process—it is about building relationships, fostering trust, and ensuring that governors feel connected to the work and impact of the Foundation.



Our people

Over the past five years, the Foundation has made significant strides in strengthening its internal capacity—building a more resilient, efficient, and adaptable organisation. This work has centred on two key pillars: **our people** and **our finances**. A motivated and well-supported staff team, underpinned by a sustainable financial base, has enabled us to deliver high-impact programmes and extend our reach across the Commonwealth.

The Foundation's **2021–2026 strategic plan** set a clear ambition: to create an organisation not only capable of meeting its objectives, but also agile and resilient enough to navigate an ever-changing environment. To realise this vision, we have invested in our people, modernised internal systems, and adopted a more strategic approach to financial management. These efforts have strengthened our ability to respond to the needs of our Member States and the communities we serve.



The Foundation with members of the 2026 Pacific Islands Forum in Fiji

The Foundation's ability to deliver at a high level within a modest budget is a direct result of the commitment and expertise of its staff. We have introduced key reforms to strengthen staff capacity, improve retention, and create a more supportive and motivating work environment.

Leadership transition

Following an intensive two-week handover period with the outgoing Director-General Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO, Ms Razmi Farook took over full responsibility as Commonwealth Foundation Director-General from September 2025. The whole team was involved in ensuring a smooth transition of leadership: supporting her welcome and induction process, arranging introductions to governors and key stakeholders, and maintaining momentum of the Foundation's ongoing work. Completing the leadership transition, Ms Clara T. Cole was appointed to the role of Deputy Director-General and assumed her position with effect from January 2026.

Competitive compensation and career progression

Following an external compensation review in **2023**, the Board approved the Director-General's proposal to introduce a **new tiered salary scale** for locally recruited staff (the entire team except the Director-General and Deputy Director-General). The review confirmed that salaries—especially at senior levels—were below market rates, contributing to higher turnover and recruitment challenges. The new structure, implemented from **December 2024**, ensures greater transparency and offers clear opportunities for career progression. A system of **skills-based progression** is now being developed, allowing staff to advance based on performance and experience.

Stronger internal structure

We have also refined our internal structure to ensure it continues to serve our evolving priorities. A major organisational redesign accompanied the launch of the 2021–2026 strategy, laying the groundwork for greater coherence and collaboration. We have continued to adapt in response to emerging needs and internal learning—revisiting roles, responsibilities and team configurations to optimise our efforts. Throughout this evolution, we have maintained the core structural integrity essential for stability, while embracing the flexibility required to grow and thrive in a dynamic context.

'We have continued to adapt in response to emerging needs and internal learning—revisiting roles, responsibilities and team configurations to optimise our efforts.'

Graduate internship programme

The Foundation's internship programme provides talented young graduates with a year of valuable professional experience. In **2023**, interns were formally recognised as employees and began receiving the **London Living Wage**—enhancing the programme's accessibility and attractiveness to a diverse range of applicants. Many of our intern alumni have gone on to secure positions in government and civil society organisations, underscoring the value of the experience gained at the Foundation.

Supporting staff wellbeing and flexibility

The Foundation has consulted staff to identify areas for improvement and ensure everyone feels fully supported in their role. In response to feedback, we introduced changes to the salary structure and enhanced provisions for professional development. The Foundation's work arrangements policy was also updated to balance flexibility with operational needs. The current policy—requiring a minimum of **five days of in-office attendance per fortnight** (including every Wednesday)—reflects both staff preferences and business needs.

Professional development and growth

The Foundation remains committed to supporting staff development through a strengthened appraisal system and regular learning opportunities. Staff have benefitted from participation in the **Future Leaders** programme and other professional development courses provided through the Secretariat. The twice-yearly appraisal process encourages staff to actively shape their own learning and career development plans.

Our finances

The Foundation’s long-term effectiveness depends on a stable and sustainable financial base. Over the past five years, we have taken a more strategic and proactive approach to financial management; strengthening accountability and working with our Member States to reduce arrears.

Annual assessed contributions

The main source of the Foundation’s income is contributions from Member States based on an agreed formula adopted by the Board of Governors. We have maintained a consistently high level of receipt of contributions and work closely with those having difficulties to support them in meeting their commitments (see figure 1).

‘Since the launch of the targeted outreach strategy, the Foundation has recovered a significant portion of outstanding arrears’

Figure 1: Proportion of annual assessed contributions received in-year, against contributions invoiced



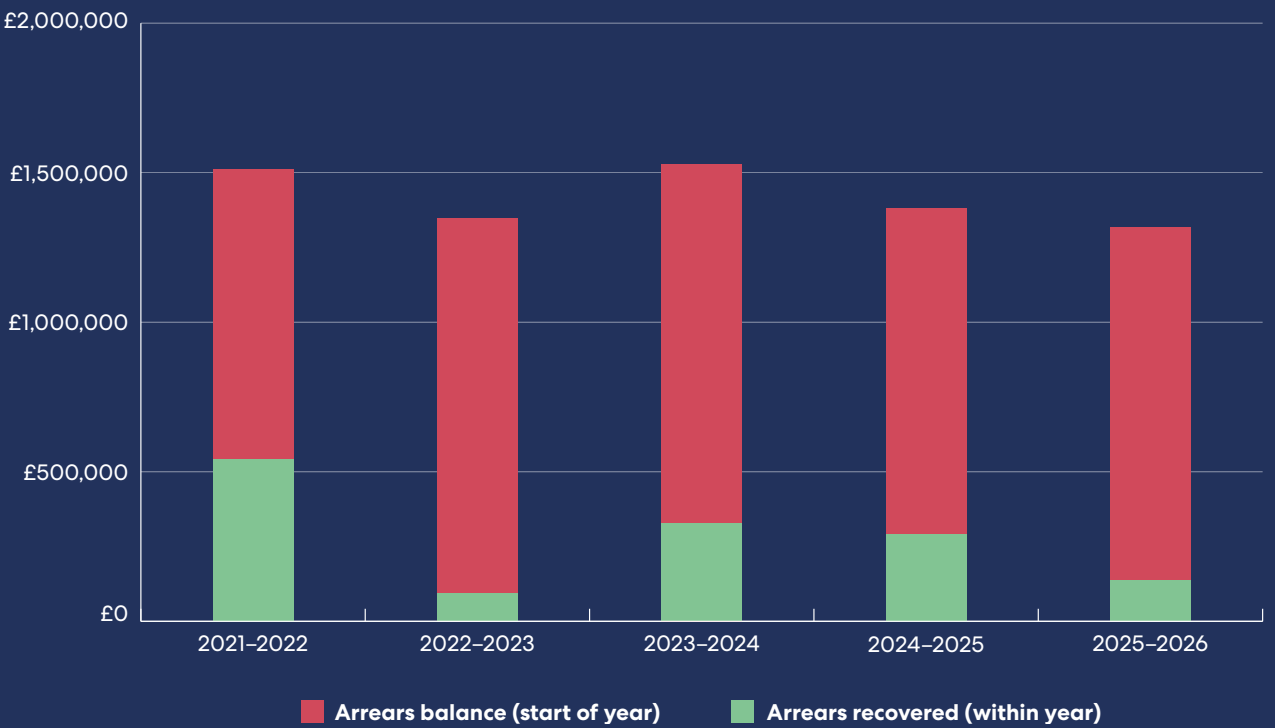
*excluding prior year arrears received

Arrears recovery and reset initiative

As discussed in the previous section on governance (see page 72), five countries—**Gabon, The Gambia, Maldives, Saint Christopher and Nevis, and Samoa**—joined or rejoined the Foundation during the reporting period, bringing total membership to 51. This growth has been supported by the success of the **arrears recovery and reset initiative**. Approved by the Board in 2022, the initiative sought to help Member States in serious arrears restore their financial standing with the Foundation. The initiative allowed for the discharge of historic debts for countries that committed to clearing three years of assessed contributions and making future payments in full and on time.

A targeted outreach strategy—led by the Director-General and supported by key governors—has produced strong results (see figure 2). Since its launch, the Foundation has **recovered a significant portion of outstanding arrears** and successfully re-engaged six Member States that had disengaged due to financial challenges prior to the initiative. Three countries remained in serious arrears when the scheme came to an end in 2024.

Figure 2: Trend in arrears recovery 2021-2026



Financial year	Arrears balance (start of year)	Arrears recovered (within year)
2020–2021	£1,431,790	£238,396
2021–2022	£1,511,598	£542,750
2022–2023	£1,346,937	£93,098
2023–2024	£1,528,428	£327,276
2024–2025	£1,382,786	£291,957
2025–2026*	£1,317,412	£136,773*

*in nine months to 31 March 2026

Targeted engagement with contributors

Despite some gains, financial sustainability remains a concern. **Several Member States—including some major contributors— remain in or have recently entered serious arrears.** In line with the policy agreed by governors, these countries are now subject to restrictions that limit their engagement with the Foundation. Of particular concern is that civil society organisations in these countries are currently ineligible for the Foundation's largest grants stream. This is especially troubling in the case of small and vulnerable states that would otherwise be a key focus of our support.

Following on from letters to the Foreign Ministers of affected countries in October 2024, the new Chair of the Foundation and Directorate have continued a programme of both in-person meetings and formal correspondence, emphasising the importance of timely contributions and encouraging renewed engagement. We will continue to rely on the support and guidance of governors—who are ultimately responsible for the Foundation's financial health—as we work to address this issue.

Expenditure

We aim to achieve break-even against our annual budget: managing our expenditure to deliver the Foundation's high-quality work while maintaining tight cost control and efficiency across all areas (see figure 3).

Strengthened financial accountability

The Foundation remains firmly committed to transparency and accountability in its financial management. Our audited financial statements are prepared with reference to international standards and are published on our website within six months of year-end. We have consistently completed the external audit process within four months, underlining our commitment to sound financial stewardship.

Figure 3: Budget allocation and expenditure 2021–2026



Shaping the Foundation: our impact

- **Financial recovery and membership growth:** The Foundation has recovered significant arrears and expanded its membership base to 51 countries—improving both financial stability and political legitimacy.
- **Greater trust and accountability:** Timely completion of financial audits and clear reporting to Member States have strengthened trust and accountability.
- **Enhanced operational capacity:** The restructuring of workstreams and the strengthening of the Office of the Directorate have improved responsiveness and output.
- **Strengthened long-term sustainability:** The Foundation’s financial position is more secure, and the operational model is better aligned with future strategic goals.

Ms Razmi Farook speaking at the launch of 'How to make a Commonwealth Quilt', in Antigua and Barbuda



Shaping the Foundation: what we have learned

- **Compensation and progression matter:** The introduction of a transparent salary scale and structured career progression recognises the hard work of staff and their central role in the Foundation's success.
- **Flexibility can strengthen staff performance:** A balanced approach to work arrangements, combining flexibility with a consistent in-office presence, can increase both productivity and staff satisfaction.
- **Targeted outreach drives financial recovery:** Direct engagement with Member States on arrears recovery has produced tangible results, reinforcing the importance of active financial management.

Strategic results framework

Vision	A Commonwealth of equal, just and inclusive societies	
Goal	Civil society across the Commonwealth is vibrant and free: Commonwealth citizens are constructively engaged in core aspects of their governance in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles	
Higher-level results	1: Commonwealth civil society is strengthened to constructively engage in governance in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles	2: Commonwealth institutions and Member States act on civil society recommendations and demands in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles
	Key impact indicator:  Partner capacity  Civil society voice	Key impact indicator:  Policy-maker responsiveness  Policy change
Expect to see	Civil society demands in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles are amplified through Commonwealth platforms and beyond Commonwealth civil society has greater access to decision-making spaces around Commonwealth values and principles and thematic focus areas Creative voices are strengthened and amplified through Commonwealth platforms in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles	Commonwealth institutions and Member States improve access to civil society to constructively engage in governance in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles Commonwealth institutions and Member States welcome contributions from civil society on thematic focus areas
Like to see	Commonwealth civil society has greater confidence operating in decision-making spaces – including multilateral policy spaces – in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles Commonwealth civil society demonstrates positive contributions to governance and decision-making in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles and within thematic focus areas, particularly in small and vulnerable states Less well-established civil society organisations in small and vulnerable states have strengthened organisational capacity to engage in governance	Governments and other institutions demonstrate changes in practice in support of Commonwealth values and principles and within thematic focus areas Commonwealth institutions and Member States institutionalise access to civil society to constructively engage in governance in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles Commonwealth institutions and Member States explicitly acknowledge civil society as partners in governance
Love to see	Civil society organisations network and partner with each other to demand changes in policy and practice in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles and within thematic focus areas Culture and creativity are integrated into advocacy networks and efforts around Commonwealth values and principles	The demands of Commonwealth civil society are taken up by decision-makers in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles Commonwealth institutions and Member States take meaningful action through changes to laws and policies in support of Commonwealth values and principles

Cross-cutting progress markers

	Gender equality	Small and vulnerable states	Young people
Expect to see	Evidence that integration of gender into the Foundation's work provides inspiration and guidance for partners	Evidence of strategic Foundation support for civil society advancement in small and vulnerable states in support of Commonwealth values and principles and within the thematic focus areas	Evidence that integration of young people and youth-led organisations into the Foundation's work increases its connection with, and relevance to, young Commonwealth citizens
Like to see	Civil society partners demonstrate a clear understanding of why a gender perspective matters and a capacity to integrate gender into their work	Civil society in small and vulnerable states is better able to contribute actively and constructively in governance and decision-making spaces in support of Commonwealth values and principles and within the thematic focus areas	Civil society partners, Member States and others take steps to meaningfully include young people in governance in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles and within the thematic focus areas
Love to see	Governments, civil society and other institutions publicly recognise and promote the integration of a gender perspective into laws, policies and practices in support of Commonwealth values and principles and within the thematic focus areas	A stronger national environment in support of vibrant and free civil society in small and vulnerable states results in more effective civil society engagement in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles and within the thematic focus areas	Young people's engagement influences change in pursuit of Commonwealth values and principles and within the thematic focus areas



Selina Tusitala Marsh at the 2024 People's Forum, Samoa

Back cover images (from left):

Speaker at Commonwealth Day 2023, photographer training course in Rwanda.

The Commonwealth Foundation is an intergovernmental organisation mandated by its member countries to advance the interests of Commonwealth civil society.

This report celebrates the achievements of our 2021–2026 strategic plan; how we have made change happen and where we have maximised our impact to drive real, measurable progress in three critical areas: health justice, climate justice, and freedom of expression.

