



THE COMMONWEALTH

Speech by Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma at the opening of the Commonwealth Public Service Ministers Forum, New Delhi, India – 24 October 2012

I am delighted to address this opening session of the Ministers' Forum on Public Administration and Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management Conference.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Government of India for hosting this event in New Delhi and to our partner CAPAM for planning and organising this conference.

The issues with which you deal, of public administration and management, and on which you will be exchanging experience over coming days, are currently more than ever to the forefront of our consciousness. We are at present completing a new strategic plan for the Commonwealth Secretariat and this will change the way we administer and manage some of the services we offer to our member states.

Partnership

The Secretariat might be termed the 'civil service' of the Commonwealth, and it has been the place to which, for many years, member states have turned for guidance when faced with the need to navigate their way through the challenges of public sector reform.

In the same way that public service reform responds to the needs of citizens, users and stakeholders, our new strategic plan will have an impact on the way we deliver assistance and expert technical support to members of our global Commonwealth family.

Partnerships will become increasingly important in providing support to our membership on developing fair, efficient and effective public administration, and we will seek to collaborate in ways that utilise to greater effect and efficiency both our own comparative advantage and the

specific skills and connections of those with whom we co-operate – including, of course, CAPAM, the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management.

Continuing reappraisal and renewal of the way in which we manage and deliver service to and on behalf of the public is crucial for method and machinery to remain contemporary and if confidence and consent are to be maintained.

The compact between government and people, between citizenry and public administration, whether at local, regional, national level - and equally at intergovernmental level - is fundamental to advancing both development and democracy. It creates trust, helps confer legitimacy, strengthens the rule of law and creates an enabling environment for inclusive and dynamic social and economic progress. I believe the evidence is overwhelming that the perception of a trustworthy, reliable, impartial and honest public administration is fundamental for citizens' trust in democracy and the state. The quality of public administration is in other words critical to a people's sense of responsive governance and of well-being.

That is why the Commonwealth has always set, as a high priority for member states, the nurture and embedding of values that result in trustworthy, reliable and impartial public administration that is free of corruption, bias or inertia.

Comparative advantage

The Commonwealth clearly enjoys a comparative advantage in this field since, among the many ties that bind us together in our global family, is our shared tradition of public administration based on many strands of our common heritage. Similar administrative systems mean that earlier experiences, identified solutions and good practices are often appropriate for application elsewhere and can be of relevance and advantage.

However, we are also very conscious that it is wise and prudent to seek out 'best fit' solutions rather than to expect 'one size' will fit all. Longstanding partnerships with our member states have given us an acute awareness of the diversity of contexts and circumstances across the Commonwealth, and the importance of being responsive to individual country needs.

Many of our members are developing countries and our ever-expanding Commonwealth networks help facilitate valuable exchanges of ideas and practices.

Furthermore, with 32 of our 54 members classified as small states we have a special role to play in helping to articulate their views at international level, such as with the G20 and at the UN hubs of New York and Geneva, in order to uphold the importance of equity in multilateral transactions.

We recognise that purely technocratic solutions are seldom adequate. Our track record of working with member states as a trusted partner in both technical and political spheres means that the Commonwealth Secretariat is well-placed to offer solutions that straddle the divide and with the benefit of an holistic and coherent approach to reform.

Commonwealth success

The process of sedimentation of our values that takes place through our reiteration and lifting of our commitment, and interactions such as our gathering here today, means that Commonwealth members demonstrate special accomplishment in most areas of governance, including public administration itself.

This is borne out by the respected measurements of governance such as the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators and the Mo Ibrahim Index covering Africa, the launch of whose latest report I attended only last week. It was gratifying to see that Commonwealth states in Africa did better on average in every key indicator of the Index. Eight of the top ten ranked countries in the Index are Commonwealth states.

Good governance is of course intrinsically desirable. But we also strive for it because of the way in which it can be instrumental in facilitating and driving forward economic growth. This would point to the connection why, according to the IMF, Commonwealth economies are also predicted to grow at an average of 7.3% over the next five years.

Such a forecast is of vital importance to our two billion citizens since 63% of the world's poor are to be found in Commonwealth states. Poverty continues to be a gruelling daily reality for hundreds of millions of our people.

Very few Commonwealth developing countries are likely to achieve the Millennium Development target for reducing child mortality, and two-thirds of all maternal deaths are in Commonwealth countries.

Such findings mean that as the post-2015 goals are developed, strengthening public administration within a framework of democratic governance is vital and pivotal to our development ambitions.

Future priorities

In order to achieve the Commonwealth's core principle of 'Just and Honest Government' we favour making the development of efficient, effective and equitable public administration a central part of our new strategic plan.

This work will be based on three of our Commonwealth comparative advantages. First, as a priority highlight the relevance of democratic principles to topics usually looked at in a purely technocratic way; second, we build on the trusted partnership status to support key reforms at the centre of government that enable development to happen; and third we endeavour to use our unique networks to even greater effect and aim to advance mutual learning and creation of partnerships.

An example is the Anti-Corruption Agencies in Commonwealth Africa Network, which was established last year, and has already become an active community of practice. Plans are now underway to establish an African headquarters for the Network. This will help make the programme an accessible and high-profile Commonwealth flagship in the fight against corruption.

The Commonwealth Public Procurement Network is another vibrant and active community of practice. Its members provide pro-bono technical assistance to each other, an example being the support Mauritius and Sierra Leone gave to Namibia in reforming public procurement.

These networks are amongst fifty communities of practice already making good use of Commonwealth Connects, our cloud-based online web platform for interaction and collaboration. This is a resource offered by the Secretariat free of charge and which all Commonwealth networks and member countries are encouraged to use and on which presentations will be made in the course of this meeting.

Another area of emphasis in our work will be on supporting the public administration of the smallest island countries in the Commonwealth. As part of this, in April in London, we are holding a conference to address the special needs of fourteen very small island states from the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific that account for a quarter of our membership. Our aim is to assist the public service establishments of these island nations to learn from each other and to innovate on the basis of 'what works' in terms of delivering social cohesion, economic growth and political stability.

Practitioners present here will know that embarking on a process to streamline and strengthen public sector administration can be a formidable challenge, as is setting out to design an appropriate structure, system and size of public service.

However, with peer support, difficulties that at first may seem daunting can be overcome. This is particularly so because of the way in which the rapid rate of technological change is transforming many traditional concepts of how public service is managed, administered and delivered.

Innovation is key, and with that in mind may I therefore congratulate the finalists of the CAPAM International Innovations Award. This award is a means for highlighting the need for new ideas and recognising the arduous task of bringing them to fruition. We will hear more about the award in due course.

May I also mention the launch during this Conference of a new Commonwealth handbook on governance.

In conclusion, I am sure that this conference - as well as the collaborative work proceeding from it, which will be taken forward online and in partnership - will yet again prove the value and true meaning of the Commonwealth – for our nations, for our communities and, above all, for all our individual citizens.