‘Vanguards in the 21st century: Optimising Commonwealth Networks’
Hosted by Global Policy Insights (GPI) and The Ramphal Institute
Keynote address: Mr Jarvis Matiya, Acting Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
Wednesday 10 June 2020 – 2pm

Good afternoon,

My name is Jarvis Matiya, Acting Secretary-General and Director of Operations at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA).

First of all, allow me to thank Global Policy Insights (GPI) and The Ramphal Institute for inviting me to participate in their e-symposium series: ‘The Commonwealth: Optimising Networks & Opportunities for the 21st Century’. It is a pleasure to follow last week’s keynote from The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat, and be with you today to speak on ‘Vanguards in the 21st Century: Optimising Commonwealth Networks’ alongside our fellow panellists. It is good to see amongst us, friends and colleagues, all united in the common good of our Commonwealth.

I would like to begin by painting a picture of our 21st century Commonwealth for those who may be less familiar with it:

Today, our Commonwealth comprises 54 diverse states. It consists of developed and developing, island and landlocked, mostly but not exclusively former British colonial territories, bound together by shared political values, history, language and institutions representing over 2.3 billion people, a third of the world’s population. Let me pause here and say that the recent developments sparked by what happened in America recently brings to the fore, and reminds us all of, the work of the Commonwealth in fighting apartheid and racism in the 70s, 80s and 90s.

Whether one of the largest or one of the smallest in our Commonwealth family, the principle of equality of states applies and is reinforced by the operating procedures which places a ‘consensus-based approach’ at the heart of decision making.

This has the advantage that the smallest and the least powerful do not have to suffer to the will of the majority. They all sit at the table as equals.

Some of our countries are some of the fastest growing economies in the world, whilst others are some of the smallest and most vulnerable, marginalised and at threat from forces such as climate change and natural disasters. The membership of the Commonwealth, unlike many
regional economic blocs and political associations, transcends the perceived ‘North versus South’ dichotomy.

The Commonwealth is far from an irrelevant historical relic that some critics portray it as. Our shared history and inherent flexibility enables the Commonwealth to remain enduring and agile in response to changing global circumstances, a strength which is particularly important in the times in which we are currently living.

Through the ongoing work of the Commonwealth, citizens can reap the benefits that come from positive dialogue and engagement on issues of democracy, good governance, human rights and socio-economic development. Through collaboration, consultation and speaking with one common voice, the Commonwealth is truly a global force for good, bringing a richness of its diversity and geographical reach to solve issues and identify new opportunities.

This Commonwealth forum for effective dialogue and shared mutual benefits has been made all the more important by the increasing focus of the international community on the development agenda, first with the Millennium Development Goals and now with the Sustainable Development Goals which were spoken about at length by Heads of Government at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2018 and subsequently formed a large part of the commitments that followed in the Communique.

We very much value the continued work undertaken by the Commonwealth Secretariat and state level actors but it is important to stress that the strength of the Commonwealth lies not only in the membership of governments but significantly in its Commonwealth grouping of peoples, businesses and civil society networks, which together constitute the Commonwealth as a distinct international family and a uniquely positioned global actor.

These Commonwealth and non-governmental organisations and structures are arguably even more important during the current situation we are facing with the coronavirus pandemic; Heads of Government cannot meet face to face as they would have done in Rwanda this month, international travel is significantly reduced, we are having to rethink how we deliver support and services via virtual and remote methods rather than being on the ground and citizens of the Commonwealth are having to rely on networks easily accessible and local to them. Many third sector and membership-based organisations are working tirelessly and collaborating with Governments to ensure the delivery of critical services and the upkeep of vital infrastructures.

One of the key non-governmental networks in the Commonwealth is my own Association, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, or the parliamentary network of the Commonwealth.

The CPA was founded in 1911 and comprises some 180 national and sub-national Branches and seeks to promote the advancement of parliamentary democracy by enhancing knowledge and understanding of democratic governance. This network connects, develops, promotes and supports Parliamentarians and their staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth.
CPA activities focus on the Commonwealth’s commitment to its fundamental political values, including just and honest government, the alleviation of poverty, fundamental human rights, international peace and order, global economic development, the rule of law, equal rights and representation for all citizens of all genders, the separation of powers among the three branches of government and the right to participate in free and democratic political process.

The CPA is the only global parliamentary strengthening body which includes devolved, territorial, state and provincial Parliaments and Legislatures and we are therefore uniquely placed in our sharing of knowledge and best practice throughout our Commonwealth network. The CPA’s vast Membership of Parliamentarians provides a prime resource and opportunity to engage in two-way dialogues, undertaken in the spirit of cooperation, promotion of shared values and tackling common challenges. No other time has this been more important arguably than now when all global citizens are faced with the threat of a pandemic and its consequences.

With the aim of supporting our Members and others outside of the CPA network during this time, we recently produced a ‘CPA Toolkit for Commonwealth Parliaments and Legislatures on the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic and delivering parliamentary democracy’ - which is linked on our website for those interested to read it. As well as research on business continuity and crisis management, it details measures actioned by various Commonwealth Parliaments and provides recommendations that can be adopted by Parliaments and Parliamentarians to continue to uphold their democratic responsibilities in the delivery of the Legislatures’ role of scrutiny and law making. This is a prime example of how we can utilise our Commonwealth networks effectively and share international best practice to tackle common challenges and enact positive change.

Whilst the CPA provides a large international platform for peer-to-peer learning for all its Membership, we also have nine regional networks within our organisation which reflect their geographical grouping on our board of Trustees. These networks act at arms-length from our London headquarters and some Regions and Branches have their own dedicated Secretariats. All hold annual regional conferences which provide an opportunity for further outreach and embedding of the values of the Commonwealth within and across regions and with Members and organisations who may not have been actively involved or aware previously.

As well as these regional groupings we also have three thematic networks within the CPA:

**CPA Small Branches**

Since 1981, we have held an annual Small Branches Conference for Members from more than 30 jurisdictions with populations of 500,000 and less. This Small Branches Network provides an invaluable forum for Members to discuss contemporary political issues and the operation of democratic systems in some of the world’s smallest jurisdictions.

Given it is the Commonwealth’s smaller states that are the most vulnerable and perceptible to factors such as economic instability, climate change and natural disaster, it is key that we have an active network that allows for open and constructive discussions on the specific challenges these countries and legislatures face and how they can be approached.
Our most recent Small Branches event enabled us to partner with the Commonwealth Small States Centre of Excellence and the Parliament of Malta early this year to offer a workshop on Sustainable Economic Development; a prime example of like-minded bodies coming together in order to collate knowledge and explore best practice in a particular area.

The network is also the vehicle for the majority of the CPA’s work on climate change, the impacts of which are a danger to those in and outside of the Commonwealth and, even in a COVID-19 world, are arguably “the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century” as the World Health Organisation asserted in recent years.

In 2017, the CPA and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to provide training and development programmes for Parliamentarians on climate change with leading global experts. The MoU has helped us to engage with legislators to strengthen national legislation, deepen public debate and enhance accountability in the management of natural resources. This work has furthered both organisation’s key objectives in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its components, namely climate change and the Paris Agreement – a good example of what a committed partnership can achieve.

As we celebrated World Ocean Day on Monday we also remind ourselves of our commitment to the Blue Charter, the action plan on protecting the ocean from the effects of climate change, pollution and over-fishing. Commonwealth countries are responsible for more than a third of the world’s coastal ocean and almost half of its coral reefs and so we all in our community have a sense of duty to preserve and protect this for future generations.

**Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP)**

The second of the CPA’s internal networks is that of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP), which was founded in 1989 to increase the number of female elected representatives in Parliaments and legislatures across the Commonwealth and to ensure that women’s issues are brought to the fore in parliamentary debate and legislation. The CWP network provides a means of building the capacity of women elected to parliament to be more effective in their roles; improving the awareness and ability of all Parliamentarians, male and female, and encouraging them to include a gender perspective in all aspects of their role - legislation, oversight and representation and helping parliaments to become gender-sensitive institutions.

Through the leadership of our CWP Chairperson, Hon. Shandana Gulzar Khan MP the network has been particularly active over the last six months, engaging with actors such as UN Women, the Global Forum for Women Leaders and the IPU on critical issues like the elimination of violence against women, women’s economic empowerment and the gender sensitisation of our legislatures.

The CWP network is also a reinforcing regional strengthening actor through the support and funds that it offers Members across our geographies and it is also a key inroad for our Members into forums such as the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women, the Commonwealth Women Affairs Ministers Meeting and CHOGM.
It is further evidence of the collaborative nature of the Commonwealth that the CPA and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum worked together at the Commonwealth Women’s Forum at CHOGM in 2018 to deliver a session highlighting the importance of women’s representation at all levels of political life and we look forward to collaborating again with CLGF and others in developing workshops for the CHOGM Women’s Forum for its rescheduled date later this year or next.

With gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at the centre of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, networks such as CWP are key in building sustainable, equitable and peaceful societies.

**CPWD**

The third of our networks is that of the Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities, which works with Parliamentarians and Parliamentary Staff across our community to ensure a disability perspective in all aspects of policy and legislation, effective implementation and enforcement of existing disability laws and policies and provisions for equal employment opportunities and training. We are currently working to reform this space and offering so that it is the most responsive it can be to our Members and their evolving needs. In order for a network to continue to be of use and valuable in an increasingly crowded sphere there needs to be constant review of its efficacy and innovation.

Outside of our internal structures and within the Commonwealth family as a whole, as mentioned the CPA is but one of around 80 or more people-centred organisations - many of which I have already touched upon. These entities often exist quietly “below the radar of wider public consciousness” but these societies, institutions, professional associations, organisations and charities are all working towards the improvement of people’s lives within our Commonwealth. This network of Commonwealth Organisations is a repository of institutional memory; they can help to maintain relations with civil society when a country leaves or is suspended from the Commonwealth and their activities bridge the gap between the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Foundation, the latter of which I believe we will hear more about from Ann Gallagher about in a little while. Without these non-state actors, progress in achieving a prosperous and harmonious Commonwealth would be much harder to achieve.

The network of the People’s Commonwealth is greatly significant and integral to invoking positive change in the 21st Century. The breadth of perspectives our Commonwealth family brings allows for new and necessary conversations to take place around issues such as global inequality, social and economic rights, the importance of peace-building and many more. This expansive, multilateral network of peoples, civil society and governments has allowed the Commonwealth to harness and project considerable amounts of soft power capital.

Often, this reliance on soft power has been used to criticise the Commonwealth as benign and toothless, with no power of sanction and lacking in hard power. However, I would argue that this is precisely the strength of the Commonwealth as, for all its perceived lack of authority, it can offer members the benefits that come from positive dialogue and engagement on issues of democracy, good governance, human rights and socio-economic development.
The CPA benefits greatly from its place within these conversations and wider networks, a key one being that of the Associated Commonwealth Organisations: a small grouping of accredited organisations who have a closer affinity to the mission of the Secretariat through our governmental or political membership and structures. As trusted partners of governments and other key stakeholders across member states, we can provide an invaluable resource and have the capacity and positioning to innovate, develop and deliver policy and programme support in pursuit of Commonwealth goals and priorities.

Another vital yet smaller in size network that we are fortunate to be a part of is that of the Commonwealth Latimer House Working Group. Alongside the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, Commonwealth Legal Education Association and Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association were tasked by the Commonwealth Secretariat in 2012 to develop a unique tool of two training modules on the Latimer House Principles. The training is still ongoing and it is excellent to play a role in promoting awareness and dialogue among stakeholders within member countries on political and governance issues related to accountability, transparency and the separation of powers between the three branches of government.

Working together in this way with other organisations provides an invaluable opportunity to create strong relationships for ongoing mutual development and discourse benefitting our Commonwealth Members for years to come.

Going forwards, whilst the pandemic we currently face introduces new challenges and obstacles in how we operate and the methods with which we’re able to engage with each other, the ‘new normal’ also provides opportunities. Whilst we may not be able to engage in person during these unprecedented times, opportunities that take advantage of modern technologies allow us to continue to operate within our networks and support our Memberships. Additionally, collaborating with organisations who we may not have had the opportunity to partner with previously due to geography or other constraining factors enables the reaffirmation of cooperative approaches across the Commonwealth to facilitate rich knowledge sharing and capacity building during this pandemic, and in the future.

With that I will close so that we can hear from others and I look forward to my fellow panellists’ contributions.

Thank you.