

**Statement by Kaifala Marah, Adviser - Public Expenditure
Management – Commonwealth Secretariat
Opening of the 3rd Commonwealth Public Procurement Network
(CPPN) Technical Conference
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Mr Chairman, Honourable Minister, the Chairman, members and CEO of the National Public Procurement Authority of Sierra Leone, distinguished delegates from Commonwealth member countries, dignitaries drawn from the Sierra Leone public service, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I bring you warm greetings from His Excellency Mr Kamallesh Sharma, Secretary General of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Director and colleagues in the Governance and Institutional Development Division.

On behalf of my colleague, Ivy Chikoti, and on my own behalf, let me first of all thank the National Public Procurement Authority and the Government of Sierra Leone, including CEO Professor Alfred Kandeh and his forward-looking team for hosting the 3rd Commonwealth Technical Conference on Public Procurement, and for having us on this beautiful lion mountain, Sierra Leone. Let me also recognise the presence of Mr Winston Tan, Director of Wellern International, from Singapore and a host of distinguished resource persons who are here to add value to our deliberations during the next few days.

Mr Chairman, I wish to focus my statement on three key issues: first, the current financial crisis and its implications on developing member countries, second, the relevance of this technical conference and our expectations and third, the nature of public sector leadership in the 21st century development environment.

The Ongoing Financial Crisis

The current financial crisis has dictated that a new paradigm on global capitalism and international financial governance be created at the highest level to guide financial posterity. It has been argued by some schools of thought that the ongoing meltdown will have little impact on the economies of Africa given that its financial markets are

not fully integrated with that of the north. Whilst this argument holds little relevance, perhaps Commonwealth African leaders and country bureaucracies might want to take a critical look at a World Bank estimate that a further 44 million people have been added to the number of the world's undernourished in 2008. In addition, I would like to draw attention to some of the impacts that the crisis will bring to bear on developing economies:

- Severe strains will be placed on the balance of payments by increase in prices
- Growing pressure on governments' budgets
- Less direct foreign investments
- less multi donor budgetary support
- Fewer remittances from Commonwealth citizens abroad
- Fewer tourists to Commonwealth destinations- the list goes on

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, the grim scenario does not only call for a global collaborative approach, but it broadly speaks to the need for regional and in-country initiatives to tackle the situation. While the Commonwealth Secretariat will continue to play its part in the form of providing technical and policy advice to member countries, attention must be drawn to the need for country technocrats to take the lead in developing economies; this could be done through brainstorming the crisis, monitoring and reviewing country and sub-regional trends, and to provide appropriate advice to governments. In short, chief administrators, financial experts, policy and research think tanks must come forward in our developing economies to help contain the spill over effects of the crisis.

Relevance of the CPPN Technical Conference

Mr Chairman, the second segment of my statement is centred on why we are all assembled here. I am thrilled at heart that the Commonwealth Public Procurement Network (CPPN), which is a forum of heads and senior procurement practitioners, has continued to grow from strength to strength since its inception in 2006. Today, the CPPN brings procurement regulatory agencies from 12 Commonwealth African nations and 1 Caribbean country to share experiences, explore new initiatives and to map out programmes of common interests.

During the last two years, The CPPN has registered numerous successes, key among them are the following:

- The Public Procurement Authority of Ghana has hosted a number of sister procurement agencies to learn from its procurement benchmarking, monitoring and evaluation tool,
- Ghana has also facilitated the creation of a warm relations between the Marrakech Task Force for Sustainable Procurement and the CPPN – this year, the CPPN members participated in a Marrakech training programme on sustainable procurement in South Africa
- Cordial working relations has also been struck between the OECD-DAC Joint Venture and the CPPN

On this note of successes achieved, Please join me ladies and gentlemen to applaud all the key players and the CPPN.

During the course of this conference, the Commonwealth will be looking forward to the review of country processes, sharing of ongoing initiatives of the OECD and the Marrakech Task Force, as well as e-procurement dynamics of Singapore. Most importantly, we hope that sharing of country experiences will enhance the learning loop. Beyond the learning process, however, we are looking forward to the group workshops crucial to the future of this professional body. First, we hope that members will adopt a transformation strategy on the CPPN such that it will henceforth be largely managed by its members; second, we anticipate that the CPPN will develop a list of action plans that will guide the Commonwealth Secretariat's intervention and technical support to member countries, and finally, we hope that a proposal of workable plans will emerge to facilitate the expansion of the CPPN to other regions of the Commonwealth.

Since public procurement midwives between 60 to 70 percent of national public expenditures, a strategic niche for sharing of experiences and challenges across boundaries and regions is required in the 21st century development dynamics more than ever before. On this note, Mr Chairman, allow me to commend and congratulate delegates and all facilitators in anticipation of a fruitful conference.

21st Century Public Sector Leadership

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I will now move on to the third and final component of my statement - 21st century public sector leadership and its implications on national development. If you are interested in institutional reforms, please listen now. This new century demands three interrelated dynamics for national as well as institutional transformation:

1. New institutions
2. New strategy
3. New thinking

In discussing these elements, I would like everyone present here to note that if we always do as we always did, we will always get as we always got! In short, applying the same principle and mindset in the face of today's evolving challenges will always give us undesired results. Therefore, I am tempted to ask: have governments met the criteria of new institutions? Yes, they have – and this is manifested in the creation of procurement agencies. What about strategy, yes! that has been met too – as manifested in procurement boards, laws and regulations. But what about new thinking? I think that is the challenge I will like to address:

Strategy and new thinking are two sides of a coin called change, and change, they say, is accepted by only those in whose pockets it jingles. Change in the public sector is the new thinking, it could be called, creativity, innovations, dreams and vision of leadership. Change is the strategic capital that must be openly spent by CEOs of the new institutions being created by governments. And I would ask the permission of the chair to allow me to say this: if you do not initiate change, change will definitely influence your work. Change will come to you and it does not matter whether it is a good or bad change – change will come to you and will distort the direction of your agency.

Invariably, therefore, public sector leaders are faced with two options: Initiate change or be influenced by one. If you chose the former, you would have made your expertise relevant to your agency by giving it the strategic focus it deserves; on the contrary, if you chose the latter,

you inadvertently create a vacuum that will be filled with solutions provided by external players that are alien to your reform environment, and in addition, you would have invited all and sundry to dictate the pace of your procurement reform. I crave your indulgence to be proactive and to take charge of your reform programmes. It is better to implement a policy that is partly shaped by your thinking so that you will continue to shape its character, rather than find yourself on the wrong side of a policy supplied by those not familiar with procurement reform.

I say so because, there is a devil in the details of the politics of some policies, and it is your role as public sector leaders to not only identify the details in the devil, but to defuse them through the employ of a coordinated strategy. Perhaps this could be done through team work, through consultations with the parent ministry and by taking a long-term view of your reform strategy. Let me concede that leadership cannot be thought but perhaps it could be learned, and that while we may not teach passion, perhaps it could be inspired by CEOs. And as today's change makers, as the flag bearers of policy implementation of this new century, I will urge you, you, our dear procurement CEOs to continue to inspire your teams.

Let me submit that political will alone is not enough, but that a complementing bureaucracy is always required to propel reforms. This is because, while politicians may determine what is to be done, the bureaucracy always decides how it will be done; and deciding how it is done invariably shapes what is to be done. This is why I am of the view that every successful public sector programme is contingent on a trinity of politicians, administrators and professionals. I wish to also draw attention that a notable challenge that confronts 21st century bureaucracy is breaking the cycle of conventional thinking; conventional thinking is a norm that does not allow leaders to subject longstanding practices to rigorous reviews for the adoption of innovative thinking to reflect currency. In this regard, I am urged to invite administrative leaders to reflect on some of the questions that the 21st century leaders ought to ask:

- Are we delivering our core mandate and meeting our targets?

- Are we a relevant institution or do we need to redefine and realign our services to the needs of our clients?
- Are our processes up to date, or do we need a change in process?
- There are always missed opportunities, what are they and how do we identify them?
- Do we talk to other institutions; are we a collaborating institution, or a do-it-alone body?
- What does the audit reports say; and by the way, must we review, assess and set out new targets?

These are arguably some of the several questions that public sector leaders should subject their agencies to. But a note of caution: these questions could only be asked in an environment where CEOs are given the leverage to act with limited political interference. CEOs require administrative space to perform, and space, they must be given.

On this note, Mr Chairman, I do hope that this forum will keep tab on some the issues raised in this statement, and that we will go further by speaking to other operational challenges facing agencies.

In concluding while wishing delegates fruitful deliberations during the course of this technical conference, I also wish to share my last words with this august body for the consideration of all:

The acid test of change lies in the strength and vision of leadership, in the poise of policies, in a robust people process and in the flexibility to review and adopt new ideas. While we may have inherited the past, the present is the only opportunity we may have to shape the future, and we do so by drawing lessons but also not being afraid to introduce new thinking.

I thank you all for listening to me
Good morning