CASE STUDY Contributor : Khalid Miah

Using AI to Strengthen Institutional Memory in a Multi-Actor Coalition

Reflections from the CSCC Secretariat

This case study demonstrates how AI can support institutional memory in multi-actor coalitions by structuring discussions, improving transparency and strengthening coordination, drawing from lessons learnt from the implementation of the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition.

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1. Overview

Artificial intelligence (AI) is often discussed as a tool for generating outputs more quickly. However, in multi-actor governance initiatives, its more durable contribution may lie elsewhere, through strengthening structured transparency and preserving institutional memory.

From a Secretariat perspective during the proof-of-concept phase of the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition (CSCC), one of the coordination realities we encountered was not a lack of engagement or ambition, but the practical difficulty of ensuring that discussions, commitments and emerging priorities remained visible across thematic groups. In short-term coalitions, conversation accumulates quickly. Shared synthesis does not always keep pace.

We used AI tools cautiously to support transcript analysis, mandate comparison, template development and reporting alignment. Their role was not to replace consultation, research or lived expertise, but to assist the Secretariat in organising information coherently and reinforcing reference points over time.

This case study draws on lessons learnt from the CSSC on how AI can help convert discussion into structured memory within coalitions, provided it is embedded within clear governance processes and subject to human oversight. Its power is in remaining as an assistant and not an author.

2. Context and Structural Challenge

The CSCC proof-of-concept phase brought together governments, professional bodies, universities, and practitioners to advance the implementation of the Commonwealth Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation adopted at CHOGM 2022 in Rwanda and reaffirmed at CHOGM 2024 in Samoa. Three thematic Action Groups: Urban Finance, Housing and Integrated Planning, were established alongside cross-cutting priorities including skills, gender, youth and climate.

From the Secretariat's vantage point, coordination was less about resolving disagreement and more about maintaining coherence across parallel streams of activity. Each Action Group developed its own Terms of Reference and workplan. Given the compressed timeframe, delivery understandably took priority. Our role was to retain visibility across these workstreams and ensure connections were identified where relevant.

Information management quickly became central to this task. Meetings were held across multiple platforms and documents were shared through different systems. Access arrangements reflected institutional diversity rather than dysfunction, but they required deliberate effort to maintain a consolidated overview.

Without structured synthesis, institutional memory can fragment. Productive discussions risk becoming difficult to retrieve or align over time unless translated into accessible summaries, validated decisions and consistent reporting categories. Strengthening transparency, in practical, document-based terms, therefore became part of the Secretariat's coordination function.

3. Project Approach and Delivery Model

AI tools were introduced gradually to support this coordination role.

One of the most immediate applications was transcript synthesis. Meetings were recorded and transcribed, after which AI-assisted summaries helped distil key themes, decisions and action points. This reduced the administrative burden of live notetaking and enabled quicker circulation of minutes for validation. More importantly, it converted extended discussion into structured reference points that could be revisited across Action Groups.

AI was also used to compare draft Terms of Reference across groups. A standard template had been developed centrally, and partners drafted their own versions based on this template. AI-assisted comparison made it easier to surface overlaps, clarify wording and check consistency with agreed objectives. From a Secretariat perspective, this supported alignment without imposing additional reporting requirements on partners.

Beyond meeting documentation, AI proved particularly useful in strengthening reporting coherence. As progress reporting templates were developed in line with the Theory of Change, AI was used to sense-check whether indicators were measurable, whether cross-cutting themes remained visible, and whether narrative sections reflected programme commitments consistently. This was not about generating new substance, but about testing internal alignment. In a short-term coalition, reporting structures can shape what remains visible over time. AI-assisted review helped reinforce consistency across workstreams and reduce the risk of thematic drift.

AI was also used to structure risk registers and assessment matrices, whilst maintaining clear boundaries. AI did not assess applications or make evaluative decisions. Consultation, research and professional judgment remained central to all substantive outputs.

Throughout the process, AI-generated summaries were reviewed against source material. Where nuance was lost or context required clarification, outputs were refined manually. AI functioned as an assistant to institutional memory rather than a substitute for interpretation.

4. Insights and Lessons

Several lessons became clearer over time as the project progressed.

Firstly, coordination challenges in multi-actor coalitions often stem from continuity rather than conflict. Whilst dialogue may be constructive, what ultimately shapes shared understanding is how reliably discussions are translated into structured reference points. From a Secretariat perspective, validated summaries and coherent reporting templates became stabilising mechanisms. AI-assisted synthesis did not guarantee engagement, but it strengthened the retrievability and reinforcement of agreed language, particularly during reporting cycles.

Secondly, this experience suggests that coalition governance benefits from deliberate design of what might be described as a “memory architecture” i.e., structured mechanisms that preserve continuity across meetings, workstreams and reporting processes. In practice, this includes consistent templates, transparent summaries and cross-group comparison of outputs. AI proved most useful when embedded within this infrastructure, supporting alignment rather than attempting to replace deliberation.

Thirdly, transparency and legitimacy depend on maintaining human judgment. AI must not substitute consultation, research or lived expertise. Its contribution is infrastructural through reducing cognitive load and helping to stabilise institutional memory while decisions and insights remain human-led.

5. Key Takeaways

- From a Secretariat perspective, coordination challenges often relate to continuity and information flow rather than disagreement.
- Institutional memory can fragment quickly in short-term coalitions unless deliberately structured.
- AI can assist in converting discussion into accessible, transparent reference points.
- Reporting architecture plays a central role in reinforcing continuity across workstreams.
- Consultation, research and expert judgment must remain central to coalition legitimacy.
- Designing “memory architecture” into governance processes may strengthen long-term alignment.

This Case Study was prepared by Khalid Miah, CSSC Programme Manager, The Association of Commonwealth Universities, March 2026.

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