



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

Innovations for Successful Societies Oral History Project

*An initiative of
the National Academy of Public Administration,
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,
Princeton University.*

Oral History Program

Series:
Interview no.:

Governance Traps
J6

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Interviewer: Matthew Devlin

Date of Interview: October 7, 2009

Location: Bogotá, Colombia

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www.princeton.edu/states

DEVLIN: Today is October 7th, 2009 and we are in Bogotá, Colombia with David Escobar currently campaign manager for Sergio Fajardo's presidential bid and formerly private secretary during Fajardo's mayoral administration. David, thank you for joining us.

ESCOBAR: *Thank you for the invitation.*

DEVLIN: Perhaps we could start by asking you to explain the nature of your responsibilities during Fajardo's administration in Medellín.

ESCOBAR: *Usually, in Colombia, being a private secretary is something like living with politicians, getting them contracts and positions in the public sector, but in my case, due to the way we achieved power in city hall, my role was pretty different. First, I was in charge of what we called the Projects Office for the municipality. The office had to control and orient all the strategic projects of our development plan. In Colombia, a development plan is like a four-year budget with the programs and projects organized month-by-month. So I was in charge of controlling, orienting and making sure that those projects were deployed according to the principles of the movement and the government platform or the campaign platform and the development plan. That was my main role. At the same time, I had to solve problems or crises and coordinate the cabinet. I was a kind of Chief of Staff, to put it simply. Then I was head of the Office of the Mayor. I was in charge of coordinating all the staff around him, the advisors on social things, communication, public opinion, the relationship to communities and his agenda, his schedule.*

DEVLIN: So there was a massive transformation in Medellín's situation from the beginning of Fajardo's administration to the end, but before we get to that could you help us understand the situation that Fajardo inherited in 2003, at the beginning?

ESCOBAR: *Yes, if you look at Medellín in the '90s, it was the synthesis of what Colombia is from a negative perspective with violence, narco traffic and corruption. That was Medellín to the world in the late '80s and early '90s. That was our city. That situation didn't change during the decade of the '90s. Some things improved. Security improved some, but not much. That was the situation in 2004 when we entered City Hall. There were one hundred homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. The largest corruption scandal was about our utility company. A utility company is one of the most important assets of a municipality and ours was the pride of the inhabitants of Medellín, until the corruption and scandals.*

Medellin was, according to independent polls, the least transparent city regarding the public procurement process in Colombia. To put it simply, it was the most corrupt city and the most violent city with 100 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, although that was better than 381, the number in the early '90's. Medellín was living in fear. Our self-esteem as a city, our sense of being capable of solving these problems and moving forward was very low. That was the scene in 2004 when we got into City Hall.

DEVLIN: So in running for mayor, what was the strategic direction of Fajardo's campaign and what was the coalition that was built around that?

ESCOBAR: *Mr. Fajardo created and founded a civic movement in 1999, in the middle of the crisis. People from NGOs, academia, the private sector, some journalists and people from the cultural sector helped organize the civic movement called*

Spanish Compromiso Ciudadano, that is Citizens' Commitment. Compromiso Ciudadano was created in '99, by people who had never participated in politics before. In 2000, as the leader of the movement, Mr. Fajardo campaigned for mayor for the term 2001 to 2003. We didn't win, but we got pretty impressive popular support by obtaining 60,000 votes. It was the first time in our city that someone different, not belonging to the traditional liberal and conservative parties in Colombia was that close to winning political power. So we never stopped. We worked and never stopped. We gave flyers to everyone for two years. We never joined a coalition with the traditional politicians in Colombia. That was part of the strategy. We were not with them because they were representing something that was the cause of the problems of our city.

The tactics were simply handing out flyers, going through the streets, talking directly to people. We had no money, we had no traditional leaders who sell votes or trade them for favors. Simplifying, that's what we did and we won by a landslide. If you add all the traditional parties, two or three candidates at that time, the three opposition votes together didn't reach our number of votes. So we did something historical.

DEVLIN: There you were, without the support of the traditional party bosses, Mr. Fajardo has referenced a support group and also has a group of fifty friends, the number fifty friends. Can you talk about that group?

ESCOBAR: *I call that our mythological foundation. It is a group of fifty people from all those sectors I mentioned. They were the embryo of the movement. But in time that number grew. In our second campaign for mayor, we had more than 200 volunteers and around 1200 people were working on our proposal for the election. So the movement that had begun with only fifty people, before the election had more than 2000 people working directly on the campaign.*

DEVLIN: Mr. Fajardo has characterized his framework, his initial approach as bringing violence down and immediately bringing in tangible, social improvement.

ESCOBAR: *Even though we won by more than 200,000 votes, traditional politicians and many, let's say informed people, were saying, "The City Council is going to swallow you without chewing you, it's going to be easy for them". We had only two out of 21 members on the City Council, but what we did was simple. We framed our strategy to reduce violence. Immediately is important here, immediately we answered with a huge packet of interventions, of social interventions such as education, health, urban or public works, urban transformation. That was like a virtuous circle of improvement. That was the strategy. Then we planned our first tactics very carefully. We knew what we were going to do because we had really worked on our platform. Usually politicians in Colombia say, "The proposal is not important, let's not care about that. Let's win and then we'll see".*

In our case, we had worked with the best minds in the city on our platform so that when we won, we knew what we were going to do. In Colombia, there is a political process of approval of the development plan, some participation mechanisms with City Hall. We spent six, seven months planning. That was politically risky because many people were expecting quick results, but what we did was plan very carefully what we were going to do. We had some tough days doing that.

At the end we never sold or bought a vote of the members of the Council. We never gave them anything in exchange for the vote, for their support. And you know what? The development plan was approved unanimously.

DEVLIN: Why?

ESCOBAR: *Because we designed a new method for political discussion or public debate in Medellin. We did all this publicly. Everything was transparent. You could see it on the website, on TV, in the local newspaper. So it was very difficult to plan any kind of extortion. Then we told them, "You know, by definition you are good people. By definition, you are decent. We are not prejudging you". We never, ever tried to confirm a government coalition. The only thing we said was that we would make temporary coalitions with anyone, despite the party or if they had been an enemy during the election. It didn't matter. It didn't matter on projects, on areas, on arguments. We simply closed the tap of corruption. It was hard to do, but we did it. No positions, no jobs, no contracts, no nothing.*

Most of them said, "You know, the only way to get re-elected in four years is to work with these guys". What we did was offer them public acknowledgment, permanent public acknowledgement for their ideas, their projects and their support. "You are supporting me on education. I don't care if you are from the liberal party and you were saying that I was incapable of governing or stupid or corrupt, I'm going to say in front of your people, of your constituents that you helped us." So that method was pretty successful politically speaking.

DEVLIN: So we've been talking about the city council, was the departmental government and the national level government something you had to interact with in these early phases? Were there difficulties there?

ESCOBAR: *No. Well, of course, we were from different political parties, but Compromiso Ciudadano, our citizens' commitment, has a declaration of principles. Some people said that we were pretty simple, pretty naive, why principles? We were looking at real politics. But that set of principles was very useful for organizing, well, for framing or designing the relationship with the city council or the other levels of government. With the national government it was very easy. We were not confronting them at the national level. We were not doing that. We were governing Medellin, so that was our objective. So what we said was, "Maybe we don't agree with everything you are doing, but we need you and you need us in order to be successful in this city". We were transparent. President (Álvaro) Uribe and Mr. Fajardo knew each other for years. Mr. Uribe, when he was a governor for our department Antioquia, invited Fajardo to be part of the Science and Technology of the Private-Public Partnership for Antioquia. So they were not friends, but they knew each other; they knew each other's character and priorities and transparency.*

President Uribe's government understood that we were a very good city to work with. Regarding reintegration, we co-financed the programs and we managed them together. For housing we did a lot of things together. We co-financed health with the national government, with the departmental government and the city government. So it was pretty simple. Respect, respect for the differences and the different political views of the world, but work on the projects. It was pretty successful.

DEVLIN: So as you said you took this risky calculation that you would hold off your plan properly and not implement any quick wins; you were going to do it on your own—.

ESCOBAR: *We did some things, but more with communication than actual public works or programs or things like that. We did a lot of things. Part of the success of the administration was our public communication program. Fajardo is by nature a great communicator and this is important in government. For example, Antanas Mockus, (two-term Mayor of Bogota) says that governing is communicating. For us it was like that. We knew that we had the responsibility of creating and generating hope and moving forward over that hope in order to open some space for our political action. So we were celebrating anything that could be considered a victory. For example, Mother's Day is one of the most valued days in Colombia. Families gather together, but they have fights and if they are armed and things happen, bad things happen. So we did a public campaign in May, we did a public advertising campaign, in order to create a collective sense of responsibility around that day. We diminished the homicides by 40%. That was very important for us and we celebrated that publicly.*

At the finals for the Colombian soccer championship, two teams of Medellin got to the finals. The whole country and some international media were saying that with the passion around soccer, they were going to kill each other. If you asked the general of the police or the general of the military division in Medellin, they would say, "Tanks, special forces for riots and thousands of men would be needed". That was their automatic answer. They were in the frame of mind of the Medellin of the '90s and the '80s. We said, "No". We needed police, of course, we needed order, but we said that we were going to work with the fans in order to create some rules of coexistence, of behavior, during the game and we did it. Not one fight. No dead people, no wounded people and all without tanks and without thousands of policemen and members of the military. We celebrated that, day by day, and created a sense of hope.

Fajardo went to Italy. It was the first time he traveled abroad in order to look for cooperation and partners for our projects. He went there with a notebook, drawing the map of Medellin, telling about our dreams, about our history, our movement, about how we wanted to build libraries, parks, schools, promenades, but nobody believed him. They were saying that he was a crazy mathematician who got into power in a very complicated, complex city. But we were doing the same thing in Medellin. For example, when we decided where we were going to build the library and park, we did a TV show with a donkey and wagon, we opened the plot, and we were saying here we are going to build the most beautiful library on that. That was only the beginning.

We were doing cultural events on a boat. We were celebrating the first stones of every building. We celebrated everything. We held community meetings on the boat or at unfinished buildings to show what was going to come in the future. We were communicating all the time that we were doing better. And we were measuring publicly the number of homicides and we told the citizens how much we were improving by bringing homicides down to 13%, 12%, 20%.

Of course, when we had a weekend with more homicides than usual, we were also saying, "Look, we're not doing well. Let's do something". That was, I think, crucial for building hope. If you have hope you can fight; you can talk about programs and projects and things like that.

DEVLIN: So all this was selling the dream, selling the vision to the people of Medellin. I'm wondering, how was that same vision sold to the municipal administration, because bureaucracies are hard mindsets to change?

ESCOBAR: *I'll give you the example with the teachers. In Latin America, the teachers are the most powerful public servants. The most powerful unions in Latin America are the Mexican and the Brazilian teachers' union. In Colombia it is like that. In Medellin, I think we have around 11,000 teachers. City Hall, without the teachers has 5,000, so they more than double the rest of the public servants. They were crucial because education was the center of our agenda.*

So I'll tell this anecdote. When I was a freshman at City Hall, beginning our job there, I received a visit from some consultants from the Inter-American Development Bank on education. I remember what they told me at the dinner that night. They said the only way to improve education in Latin America is get rid of the teachers. I went, "Yes, very good consultant, but that's legally and technically impossible. Even worse, if I declare the teachers my enemies and I say that they are bad, the bad ones are going to be worse and the good ones are going to be mediocre and I'm going to have 11,000 enemies; I'm going to have strikes all the time".

To make a long story short, in 2007 we celebrated zero strikes in four years. The teachers were part of the transformation of the quality of public education in Medellin. They were part of that. We didn't create a complex system of incentives for them as some people said we should or results-type payment or remuneration for them, salaries, we never did that. What we did was to say, "You are all by definition good teachers. You are going to work with us and we're going to celebrate every success you have. We created prizes, "Medellin, the most educated city. Annually we gave prizes for the best public school, for the best private school, for the best teacher, for the best principal, for the best research project, for the best IT school, and so forth. That was the most important day of the year for us, and for them.

The first time, they had some doubts about our intentions, but the second time, the convention center of the city, the largest room of the city, was packed. We had people outside watching the ceremonies on TV. It was the only day of the year when Fajardo was wearing a tie, because it was the most important day of the year. Of course, not all of them were good, but we created in their minds a sense of dignity. If you are treated with dignity you'll do things better. Maybe the math teacher is not going to be good because you are being nice to him or her, but they will be better than they are right now. That was the same philosophy for the rest of the public servants.

DEVLIN: Now before you can achieve any of these successes that you've just mentioned, you've got to have a staff to carry it out. So I'm wondering, when you reflect on your responsibilities, you said they were similar to a Chief of Staff position, what qualities did you need on that team and where did you find them?

ESCOBAR: *We talked about four qualities all the time. The first was knowledge, people who knew about their subject, about their field. The secretary of transportation was a guy who spent 25 or 30 years studying the issue. We were not experienced public servants, but we knew about the job. So first, knowledge. Second was honesty. It's not that easy to achieve honesty. The third one was social sensitivity, knowing about the problems of people and being able to go to the poorest neighborhood and talk to the poorest woman about her problems. Know the problems, to talk to the people directly. Be close. The fourth one, passion.*

Without passion, none of these will be possible. The way Fajardo tells the story is that we were fifty crazy people. Fifty crazies. Everyone thought that we were completely nuts. We need those kinds of crazy people, people committed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, twelve months a year on this task and that was crucial.

DEVLIN: You mentioned you had a projects office where you'd monitor information and how people collected it. How you measure success. It is obviously a big challenge. How did your team approach that, what was important for you there?

ESCOBAR: *The first important thing in doing that is to prioritize. We chose thirteen big, large projects. I'm talking about 400 thousand million pesos, that's something like 200 million dollars. Prioritize. If you look at the development plan, you are going to see 2500 programs and projects. So we chose thirteen. That's the first important thing. Know what you are going to do and prioritize and focus on that.*

Then we developed a very simple monitoring system. I hired excellent interns. We hired the eleven best university students. They were finishing their under graduate work, to work for City Hall. Formerly the City Hall was the place where nobody wanted to work. It was a corrupt, inefficient, horrible place. Fajardo has sex appeal politically speaking, and we are going to call the best one hundred students of Medellin to work for us for a semester. I'm very proud because I created that program with Fajardo.

Then we employed those students, not to do PowerPoint presentations and fix the video games or keep the notes of the meetings, they were part of this. They worked with me. At least three or four were working every semester monitoring the projects. They were working with the project managers. They were helping them to maintain their focus on the priorities. They were also talking with the community. They were listening to what the community was thinking about the projects. They were talking with the politicians. They were talking with the contractors and they were taking pictures. They were recording interviews in order to understand what was happening on the projects and at the same time, what may sound simple and obvious, we were guaranteeing that those projects had the money enough to be deployed.

I don't know how it is in other countries, but in Colombia many, many public projects approached from the public sector got delayed or never finished because they don't have the money and the political will to move forward to get to the end. Every week we prepared fifty or sixty pages of an amazingly detailed report because the devil is in the details, the details about what was happening on those thirteen projects around the city.

I was working with these young people and with the project manager. We also created a parallel municipality focused only on those projects. Each project had steering committee, a manager, a team, full time and we worked with them. Every week we sent a report to the mayor. I spent my whole Sunday looking at what was happening. If a tree needed to be cut, you had to work with the environmental authority in order to get the permit. I was in charge of that. I knew about it so I would be the one to call the head of the environmental authority because we needed to cut a tree in order to build a library.

That's not futile, that's crucial. It's that kind of problem that delays a project for years here in Latin America. That was the system.

DEVLIN: I know time is short so maybe we can end with one thing. The achievements were legion in Medellin from security, education, infrastructure, tax revenue increase. Which are you most passionate about and why. Which one is closest to your heart?

ESCOBAR: *You cannot separate the parts of that transformation. You cannot do that. Because when we said, "reduce violence" and immediately entered with a full package of social opportunities both at the personal level and the community level, taking parts of that puzzle is not going to work. You cannot say that you want to improve the quality of public education, okay, public schools are a problem, but that's not enough. You reduce violence, but what happens if you reduce violence and nothing happens? The kids, generally male teenagers, don't see any opportunities to move forward in life, to study, find tertiary education or to get a job. It's going to be very easy for them to go back to crime.*

Why do people see individual opportunities, but their neighborhoods are the same. They don't see parks, they don't see services, they don't see health. The whole story would be incomplete. I can tell you about a couple of projects I love more, because I was part of them. I think that the museum, the Science Park, is one of the most historical projects we did. It's symbolic, as well. When Fajardo came to Medellin the first time, he was a mathematics professor at the Andes University in Bogotá. He came to Medellin in '94, in order to work as a consultant for the idea of a science park for Medellin. The Park would be a way to put science closer to kids, popular science.

Fajardo wrote tens of columns. His friends who were architects made tons of drafts of how the park and museum would look, but at the end, nothing happened. Do you know why? Because the decisions to build the science park was taken back by the politicians. It was only when we came to power that the political decision was taken. So the science park is one of the most important projects close to my heart and the other is the Botanical Garden because it is also symbolic. The botanical garden was opened with the name of Centenary Park when Medellin was celebrating one hundred years of the Antioquia independence. For decades it was the most important park of the city, the place where everyone met every weekend. When we came into office, the place was a mess. It had been partially privatized and nobody went there, not the rich people, not the middle class, not the poor people either, because it had been destroyed. It was horrible. We reopened it and created a magical place. Medellin is called, the City of Eternal Spring. That is one of the things we say about our city. For us, the Botanical Garden is the symbol of the rebirth of Medellin.

DEVLIN: Thanks so much for taking the time.

ESCOBAR: *You're welcome.*