



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

IMPROVING COORDINATION AND PRIORITIZATION: STREAMLINING RWANDA'S NATIONAL LEADERSHIP RETREAT, 2008 - 2011

SYNOPSIS

In 2008, President Paul Kagame was deeply frustrated with his government's inability to move Rwanda forward after civil war and genocide decimated the African nation in the early 1990s. Four years earlier, concerned about his government's lack of progress in improving services, he had launched yearly retreats to help Rwanda's top leaders develop ministerial priorities and shape plans for service delivery. While the concept seemed simple, implementation was not. Early national leadership retreats, some a week long, failed to meet expectations. Poor planning and fast-changing agendas left ministers uncertain about their roles. Reflecting the disorder, retreat participants set hundreds of objectives, and post-retreat implementation lagged. In 2008, frustrated by service delivery failures, public sector inertia and duplication across ministries, Kagame took steps to enhance coordination at the top levels of government. He created two units, a Strategy and Policy Unit within his own office and a Coordination Unit in the prime minister's office. These actions helped improve the retreat planning process. The two units worked with a retreat steering committee headed by Minister of Cabinet Affairs Protais Musoni. A reallocation of roles at the center of government and a concerted effort to build planning capacity further streamlined the retreat process. By 2011, the retreats had become high-level forums for government planning, coordination and accountability. Participants at the 2011 event developed six priorities, compared with 174 at the retreat two years earlier.

Deepa Iyer drafted this policy note on the basis of interviews conducted in Kigali, Rwanda, in September 2011. Case published March 2012. A separate policy note, "The Promise of Imihigo: Decentralized Service Delivery in Rwanda," focuses on planning and monitoring for local governments.

INTRODUCTION

"Twelve years in power without power!" Paul Kagame proclaimed to a gathering of nearly 200 senior Rwandan officials in February 2006.¹ The president's choice of words reflected his clear frustration with a good idea gone awry. One day

before the meeting, which his office convened each year to set strategic government priorities, Kagame had discovered that the organizers had omitted energy from the agenda. "How will you talk about investment, export promotion, education, and the other things that we intend to

discuss here without exploring viable ways of addressing the power crisis we are facing?” Kagame said. “... Without electricity, we achieve nothing.”²

In 1994, Kagame had led the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) into the capital, Kigali, ending years of civil war and halting a genocide. In 2000, after six years as the country’s vice president and minister of defense, he became president of Rwanda’s RPF-led government.

As the vice-president, Kagame had helped the Rwandan government organize a series of discussions and debates to help develop goals. Between 1997 and 2000, these national consultations convened Rwandan leaders from the business community, government, academia and civil society, to jointly produce strategic programs and policies.

A key outcome of the consultative process was Vision 2020, officially released in 2000. Vision 2020 aimed to shift the landlocked, post-conflict country onto a sustainable development path. It called for Rwanda’s fundamental transformation from an agrarian economy to a knowledge-based society with high levels of saving and private investment. Achieving this goal required improved infrastructure and government services.

In the years after the publication of Vision 2020, however, problems beset the government’s efforts to move forward with the agenda. Ministries had trouble coordinating the work required to deliver Vision 2020. “Ministries used to work only on their own programs,” recalled Leonard Rugwabiza, whose position as director general of national development planning and research in the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance put him close to the situation. “They did not consider working with other ministries to remove problems. For example, if a school in a district lacked a proper road going to it, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of

Infrastructure would not work together, and the problem would remain.”

Although Kagame had helped develop a strong vision for Rwanda, he increasingly felt that the government itself was the main obstacle to progress. In 2004, dissatisfied with the pace of service delivery and development, he inaugurated yearly retreats for government leaders in an attempt to fire up development efforts. He drew some support from the new Rwandan constitution, adopted the year before, which called for a “constant quest for solutions through national consensus and dialogue.” Called *Umwihereero* in Rwanda’s official language, Kinyarwanda, these retreats brought the government’s senior leadership together to set priorities for the year ahead and discuss the country’s progress toward achieving the goals of Vision 2020. Cabinet ministers and permanent secretaries attended, along with agency directors, senior government officials, ambassadors, the heads of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, and senior members of the judiciary and army. The president, the prime minister and ministers presented country and sector-level strategies and reported on the results of their work during the previous year. The retreats took place each February at Akagera Game Lodge in the eastern province, and in later years at the Lake Kivu Serena Hotel in Gisenyi, and typically lasted four to seven days.

The retreats were an innovation in a world where many countries issued “vision statements” that never left the shelf. However, few were happy with the process. Rushed planning created uncertainty in ministries about how to prepare. Unstructured agendas meant that the retreat’s program could change frequently and without advance notice. Retreat participants often spent too much time discussing relatively trivial ministry-level action items rather than strategic priorities. Moreover, retreats were rife with

anxious competition, as some ministers made quick fixes just before the gatherings to avoid denunciation for failing to achieve objectives, and others made extravagant promises to their colleagues. Follow-up was minimal, and implementation lagged.

In 2008, acting on his frustration at the pace of planning and implementation, Kagame worked with Prime Minister Bernard Makuza to redesign both structure and process. In Rwanda, the prime minister, who was appointed by the president, had constitutional responsibility for directing the day-to-day business of government—hence the need for the two leaders to work together. The two men first created new units at the center of government: the Strategy and Policy Unit (SPU) in the presidency, and the Coordination Unit and the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, both in the prime minister's office. Then Kagame turned his attention to the retreat. Starting with the 2009 retreat, Kagame assigned the responsibility for coordinating retreat preparation to the Office of the Prime Minister. He appointed the new minister of cabinet affairs, Protais Musoni, to head a retreat steering committee composed of key ministers and members of the presidency and prime minister's office. The goal was to reform the center of government—improving ministries' preparation, exercising agenda control, improving follow-up, and integrating planning with the budget to help leaders address national priorities.

THE CHALLENGE

Rwanda was not alone in its struggle to transform strategic goals into concrete results. In many places, centers of government struggled to develop targeted national strategies and mobilize their governments around these agendas. Countries around the globe, including Malaysia, South Africa and Sierra Leone, had experimented with new ways to overcome obstacles to program implementation and deliver measurable benefits for citizens. In Rwanda, Kagame had initiated

the annual retreats as one way to address these challenges.

Kagame's frustrations with the retreat process arose from several sources. First, the president's office, which organized the retreats, was usually short of time to prepare. Planning and organizing often started only a few weeks in advance, and ministries received no guidance regarding focus. Rwanda's top offices were thinly staffed, which compounded planning problems. "Sometimes, it felt very rushed, and there was not enough time for people to do a good job in putting together their work and presentations for the retreat," recalled Musoni, minister of cabinet affairs.

Second, retreat agendas were poorly defined, and the content and quality of ministry presentations varied greatly. "Each ministry presented on its own, and presentations focused more on accomplishments rather than strategic issues that required the guidance of the senior government officials present at the retreat," said Josiane Barebereho, a senior policy analyst in the SPU.

Third, while the president intended the retreats to help the ministries improve coordination and focus on government priorities, the meetings often heaped additional goals on ministries and provided little opportunity for ministry officials to work together to solve problems. "There was no real sense of shared responsibility," Rugwabiza said. Barebereho described the problem similarly: "The retreat would end, and there would be multiple priorities agreed upon for each ministry, with a total of more than 50 interventions to be carried out technically agreed upon."

Fourth, there was no system for follow-up. The government had no office for monitoring priorities and implementation plans. Moreover, the retreat planning process did not align with the budget cycle. The retreats took place in late February, more than two months after ministries submitted their budgets for the coming year. As a

result, officials often appeared at the next year's retreat with no progress on key action items and attracted criticism from Kagame and fellow retreat participants.

A shortage of guidance on what to expect before, at and after the event, coupled with poor synchronization of schedules, meant that “the retreat was initially very, very stressful for all of those involved, especially ministers,” Rugwabiza said. For many, accountability seemed synonymous with punishment. “If a certain minister had a really bad moment—not being able to explain his poor performance—we would speculate that he or she would be gone after the retreat. It was really stressful,” he said.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

In early 2008, Kagame sought advice from the Presidential Advisory Council, a group of Rwandan and international experts who provided strategic guidance. Launched in 2007, the council met twice a year, in March and September. Kagame had organized the council with a dual purpose: to gather advice on domestic issues with an eye on international complements, and to promote Rwanda's image internationally. At the time, members included Tony Blair, the former prime minister of the United Kingdom; Professor Michael Porter of Harvard Business School; Rick Warren, an American evangelical pastor; Joe Ritchie, a prominent American businessman; Michael Fairbanks, a management consultant; and key Cabinet members, including the heads of the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In response to ideas offered by the council, Kagame considered ways to restructure the presidency and the prime minister's office—the center of government—to improve the management of national planning and prioritization processes and, ultimately, help Rwanda achieve the goals of Vision 2020.

Kagame drew inspiration from Blair's introduction of two units, the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and the Strategy Unit, to streamline the center of the British government. Blair had created the Delivery Unit to help implement 20 major domestic policy priorities selected by the prime minister and his Cabinet. The Delivery Unit monitored government progress on the priorities, which focused around education, crime, health and transportation. Blair's Strategy Unit provided direct advice and policy analysis regarding the priorities.

Kagame borrowed key elements from the U.K. experience. He created the Strategy and Policy Unit (SPU) as part of the presidency in July 2008. The SPU would help ministries identify a limited set of priorities that they could realistically achieve, and prepare policy and option papers for the president and ministers. Headed initially by David Himbara, a member of the president's office and a former college professor, the SPU had 10 staff members, many of whom were recent college graduates who had worked as policy analysts.

At the same time, Kagame and Prime Minister Makuza streamlined the prime minister's office, which was responsible for cabinet coordination and oversight of implementation. In the past, duplication of functions had caused confusion and wasted scarce talent. Previously, “there were so many departments—one almost for every ministry, one for economic issues, many dealing with the same or similar issues,” said Valens Uwineza, a senior SPU policy analyst. Kagame and Makuza merged ministry-based departments and divisions in the prime minister's office to create a new Coordination Unit, intended to coordinate intergovernmental initiatives and monitor policy implementation, as well as a Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, to streamline cabinet operations.

Recent college graduates staffed each of the

new units, under the supervision of a director general. Fabien Majoro, director general of the Coordination Unit and a former employee of the International Committee of the Red Cross, said, “I think the idea behind restructuring the offices of the president and prime minister at the center of government was to bring in new people who don’t have government experience, to ensure they have a new mindset and spirit.” According to Majoro’s estimate, approximately 80% of each unit’s staff was under the age of 35.

“There was an idea that reforming the center of government—the presidency and the prime minister’s office—would drive first the center and then the lower levels of government to be more efficient as a whole,” Majoro said. “We wanted to make the river flow faster, while ensuring that things were done better.”

Because the U.K. approach to public service reform—notably the prime minister’s Strategy and Delivery Units—had inspired the creation of Rwanda’s SPU and the Coordination Unit, Kagame and the leaders of the new units looked to Blair for guidance about how to create work routines and get the new units off to a good start. Kagame felt that staff in the new units needed guidance, given the relative inexperience of many employees with the inner workings of government. Starting in 2008, the Africa Governance Initiative (AGI), a nonprofit organization founded by Blair, embedded staff members to help coach and ease the work of the organizational transition. Between 2008 and 2011, approximately 10 AGI staff members worked with the Rwandan government each year, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation. Of the 10, four AGI staff members served in the presidency, including two at the SPU. AGI also placed two staff members in the Coordination Unit. From 2009 onward, AGI collaborated with the SPU and the Coordination Unit to help streamline the retreat process.

The AGI team provided extra hands in thinly staffed units, searched out ideas and information for busy Rwandan counterparts, and provided advice as needed. Its members reported to the Rwandans, who ran their units, and coordinated through Jonathan Reynaga, who served as an adviser in Kagame’s private office and as Rwanda’s country leader for AGI. Reynaga had worked with Blair at No. 10 Downing Street, as a senior adviser on domestic policies.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

After the creation of the SPU and the Coordination Unit in 2008, Kagame made it clear that both units should work together to manage the annual leadership retreat process, with input from ministers and, later, the retreat steering committee.

At the SPU, David Himbara was a retreat veteran, having served as Kagame’s principal private secretary. Majoro, head of the Coordination Unit, was newer to government. At the Red Cross, Majoro had worked on initiatives related to humanitarian law. In January 2009, Jean-Paul Kimonyo, a Canada-educated political scientist of Rwandan descent, took over at the SPU after David Himbara left for an academic post in South Africa.

In late 2008, Himbara and Majoro assigned retreat-related responsibilities. With little time to prepare, however, they found it hard to identify needs and make improvements in the retreat process. Although the February 2009 retreat suffered from many of the shortcomings of earlier gatherings, through trial and error the leaders of the new units made progress toward coordinating their efforts in planning and monitoring.

In July 2009, Kagame appointed Musoni as minister of cabinet affairs. Musoni had served as minister and permanent secretary at the Ministry of Local Government and brought several years of ministry-level expertise to the role. He had

attended the retreats since the first in 2004. In his capacity as minister of cabinet affairs, Musoni served as head of the retreat steering committee, which was composed of key ministers and members of the presidency and prime minister's offices. Although the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs itself was not directly involved with the retreat process, Kagame felt that the minister in charge of cabinet operations should be in a position to oversee the retreat process.

For the February 2010 retreat, Musoni and the 14-member retreat steering committee oversaw retreat planning and coordinated all of the groups involved, including the Coordination Unit and SPU. The committee managed the retreat's agenda and provided broad oversight of ministries' presentations. The committee also coordinated the retreat's technical and logistical details. Kimonyo served as the committee's vice chairman. Other key members included Majoro, Minister of Economic Planning and Finance John Rwangombwa, Minister of Health Richard Sezibera, Minister of Justice Tharcisse Karugarama, Minister of Trade and Investment Monique Nsanzabaganwa, former Minister of Education and Ambassador to Japan Charles Murigande, and key members of the presidency, including Chief of Staff Ines Mpambara and Francis Gatara, principal private secretary to the president. Reynaga, AGI's Rwanda country leader, served on the committee to provide support and advice.

AGI staff supported the retreat committee, the SPU and the Coordination Unit by creating spreadsheets that listed timelines of events leading up to the retreats. The spreadsheets tracked action items, assigned each action item to responsible individuals, set deadlines, and recorded outcomes. AGI staff coached the retreat committee, the SPU and the Coordination Unit to keep detailed minutes at all internal meetings. AGI worked with each of these groups to update

the tracking spreadsheets based on reviews of progress at each meeting.

Retreat planning

Based on Vision 2020, the Rwandan government had traditionally clustered ministries into small, manageable groups focused on economic, social and governance issues. In 2006, the retreat process had adopted a similar system for ministries and agencies. For the 2010 retreat, working with the presidency and the Department of National Development Planning and Research at the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance, headed by Rugwabiza, the SPU and the retreat steering committee formed working groups for each of these three clusters. The working groups identified priorities for discussion at the February retreats.

The working groups included ministers and directors general from each cluster, along with representatives from the SPU and the Coordination Unit. The SPU, coached by its embedded AGI staff members, divided its own staff members among the three clusters and provided support by keeping cluster working group meetings on track, tracking work flow and outcomes in spreadsheets, providing templates to break down priorities, and moderating discussions on priority selection.

The SPU circulated guidelines to help the cluster working groups identify and define short- and medium-term national priorities. The guidelines included timelines with deliverable action items and set quotas of priorities, usually ranging from three to five, for each group.

Guidelines also laid out the steps involved in developing priorities. First, clusters had to revisit key strategy documents (such as Rwanda's Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy, previous years' retreat priorities, and reports produced by United Nations agencies, the International Monetary Fund and the World

Bank), review current government activity related to each of the government's goals and objectives, assess changes in the policy environment, and identify key emerging issues, risks and opportunities.

Cluster working groups then had to identify an extensive list of issues covering policy gaps (areas where there was no clear policy to achieve a strategic objective), implementation gaps (areas where actual delivery fell short of targets), and strategy gaps (areas where trends and events created new challenges). The clusters then agreed on criteria to narrow the list and determined through discussion which issues were most important for the progress of the cluster in the coming year. The clusters applied these criteria to determine their top three priorities.

Guided by the SPU, cluster working groups held meetings through November and early December 2009. SPU policy analyst Barebereho said, "The SPU's role was to provide quality assurance when clusters selected their top priorities. We asked them constantly if their priorities were tangible and achievable, if their priorities were focused, and if they actually touched Rwanda's population in terms of being measurable by outcomes."

By the end of December, the SPU had collected priorities from all three working groups and had produced a draft concept note for the upcoming retreat. The concept note summarized the previous year's retreat, outlined government progress in achieving previous goals, identified the February 2010 retreat priorities and explained the choices the groups had made. The retreat steering committee then met to review the meeting plan, including the proposed cluster goals for the coming year. The SPU and the steering committee jointly submitted a final draft of the concept note to the president in January 2010. "The final word on priorities rested with the president and prime minister, but mainly the president," Rugwabiza said. "The cluster working

groups needed to convince them why we all wanted these specific priorities to be discussed."

After receiving presidential approval to go ahead, the retreat steering committee divided itself into smaller units with distinct responsibilities. These units included the three already-formed cluster working groups, which were responsible for giving presentations at the retreat. The smaller units also included a technical working group that was responsible for checking progress on retreat preparation and vetting items that went to the steering committee; a logistics and protocol group responsible for venue, transportation and other such details; a communications group to handle media relations; a "2009 Performance" group that reviewed performance since the previous retreat; and a "2010 Performance" group, which was headed by Majoro and responsible for reviewing performance after the retreat.

The SPU and AGI staffs developed a template to ensure uniformity for the presentations the three clusters would make at the retreat. Presentations were to begin with an overview, in which each cluster would give a general outlook on achievements since the past retreat and discuss emerging issues. The presenters would then outline each strategic priority, with a detailed justification and breakdown. The SPU continued to work with the clusters to prepare presentations that followed this template. The clusters presented their draft presentations to the steering committee, whose members could suggest changes. By the eve of the retreat, presentations were ready.

At the retreat

On 19 February 2010, ministers, directors general, permanent secretaries and invited officials checked in at the prime minister's office in Kigali, received their delegate packets, and boarded buses for the retreat.

Kagame opened the four-day gathering with

Table 1: 2010 Retreat priorities

1. Increase energy production and distribution
2. Significantly reduce the trade deficit
3. Increase the number of viable small and medium enterprises
4. Increase agricultural productivity through crop intensification programs
5. Accelerate “Doing Business” reforms
6. Develop Rwanda’s strategic position within the East African Community and the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries
7. Improve land use management administration
8. Improve public service delivery, especially at the local government level
9. Deliver the nine-year basic education program
10. Increase the provision of skills development through initiatives for youth and employment promotion programs
11. Sustain malnutrition campaigns focusing on at-risk groups

a half-hour speech. The president outlined his vision for Rwanda’s future, focusing specifically on the 11 retreat priorities preselected by the clusters (see Table 1).

After Kagame spoke, the president of the Senate and the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies each gave speeches on national challenges facing Parliament. Makuza, who as prime minister was responsible for acting on the priorities, then reviewed progress on the 2009 goals. Makuza’s presentation, compiled by the Coordination Unit and AGI staffers, featured graphs that categorized progress on many of the 2009 priorities by color—green for significant progress, yellow for sufficient progress and red for poor progress. The afternoon session included open brainstorming and discussion, and a speech by the ombudsman on barriers to delivery.

On the second day, the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance gave an update on Vision 2020. In the afternoon, the minister of finance gave the economic cluster’s presentation. On the third day, the social and governance clusters gave half-hour presentations, after which the entire group provided extensive feedback. For two hours following each presentation, participants collectively brainstormed in the

presence of the president and the prime minister. Participants stood up and gave comments on each presentation, and Kagame offered his thoughts on specific ideas. “The president has a very strong memory—he remembers everything,” said Uwineza, the SPU policy analyst. “For example, when someone suggests something which might not be implementable, he will point to a retreat that happened five or six years ago and say, ‘We tried this strategy then, and it did not work. Let’s think of something different this time.’”

Throughout this process, the staff members who supported the SPU, the president’s office and the retreat steering committee kept extensive notes, which they gave to the clusters. In the evening and sometimes through the early hours of the next morning, clusters revised the proposals and devised outlines of action plans.

Because public understanding was important, the clusters worked to make sure that Rwandans knew what was going on during the retreat. “Every cluster every day worked on key messages to send to the communications team, and those messages were aired on Rwandan television and national radio,” said Barebereho. The SPU released a summary of the meeting to the media, and Musoni handled press conferences. Rwandan

newspapers covered the event heavily. “It is not good enough to sit and talk about change,” newspapers quoted Musoni as saying. “We must stand up and take personal responsibility for delivering a better life for Rwandans.”³

On the fourth day of the retreat, the clusters presented their work a second time, responding to the feedback received. Following further open discussion, the president made concluding remarks. “We have to take our responsibilities beyond the point of just doing our job. We can do much better, and Rwanda needs it,” Kagame said. “One cannot build a house without putting down the right foundation.”⁴ He criticized a “somehow” attitude, where government officials expected programs to happen “somehow” rather than driving change and implementation directly. He stressed that expecting results without hard work “is a language that I cannot understand.”⁵

Following up

“The retreat process normally starts up again as soon as the meeting ends,” Majoro said. During the following month, clusters honed action plans that described the implementation of each retreat priority. These plans listed measurable outcomes and indicators, specified actions that ministries would take each quarter and identified the people responsible for moving forward with each agenda item. “This takes all of March, after the retreat,” Majoro said. “It’s the real planning. The Coordination Unit sits with the ministries to map out the process of implementation, looking at outcomes, implementation steps, milestones, activities, risks, dependencies. If something is not realistic, we have to tell the [prime minister] that it is not feasible.”

After developing action plans, the ministers within each cluster agreed on a delivery contract with the prime minister. The prime minister assigned measurable outcomes for action plans to

each minister, and these outcomes were listed on individual delivery contracts.

Majoro assigned teams to each priority. With the help of AGI staffers, the teams used the green-yellow-red system to monitor action plans. Technicians in ministries compiled data for each priority, which the Coordination Unit collected and evaluated in cluster-level report cards.

The prime minister held quarterly reviews to assess progress on action plans. A more formal midyear review and a year-end review at the next retreat included formal evaluations of ministers within each cluster. At these reviews, the cluster heads presented progress reports, drawing on data the Coordination Unit prepared for them.

Targeting quick wins

In November 2009, as planning for the February 2010 retreat was beginning, Kagame created a Joint Delivery Committee (JDC) to enable the center of government to drive the delivery of goals by focusing on a small number of priority projects that could produce high-profile results relatively quickly and demonstrate the effectiveness of the system. The JDC was initially separate from the retreat process and focused instead on the August 2010 presidential election. Chaired by Musoni, key members included Kagame’s chief of staff and principal private secretary, the prime minister’s principal adviser, Majoro, Kimonyo, Rugwabiza, and the ministers and permanent secretaries of the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance and the Ministry of Local Government. Kagame intended the committee to improve coordination between ministries.

On 17 December 2009, at the JDC’s first meeting, members agreed to focus only on goals that were achievable within six to eight months. They further agreed to structure each JDC meeting around a single quick win, with the Coordination Unit providing policy papers and

data analysis. They then sent reports of key challenges discussed in each meeting to the president and prime minister, for possible discussion by the Cabinet.

During the first three months of the JDC's operation, several issues arose. First, the committee suffered from a perceived lack of legitimacy because it did not effectively communicate its role to the rest of the presidency, prime minister's office and ministries. Second, meetings occurred infrequently, and meeting times often changed at the last minute. Third, the JDC spread itself thin by focusing on too many quick wins—16 in all. Fourth, the quality of data analysis informing these quick wins varied greatly due to the JDC's dependency on the Coordination Unit, which in turn depended on individual ministries to collect data.

At the 2010 retreat, Kagame discussed improving the JDC, giving it a strong endorsement to become further aligned with the retreat process. Participants jointly agreed to use the JDC in fostering quick wins derived from the retreat priorities. At the retreat, participants compared the list of quick wins to the list of retreat priorities to produce a shortened, revised version.

After the retreat, the SPU conducted a detailed study on the JDC's operations and gave policy recommendations to the president and the JDC on areas for improvement. Musoni and the SPU decided that the JDC should supplement rather than duplicate the Coordination Unit's role in monitoring implementation of retreat priorities. In its quarterly monitoring reports, the Coordination Unit identified key challenges confronting each priority. From these challenges, the JDC then identified specific short-term goals—the areas of greatest need. The JDC played a limited role in priorities that showed good progress and provided additional oversight where challenges were identified. Rugwabiza said, "If we got the impression, for example, that

land consolidation was not working well because the implementing agencies needed help from the local authorities to get it done, we'd have to go to the JDC to get it done better and bring the groups together around the table."

Budget harmonization

The Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance, headed from 2010 by John Rwangombwa, worked to improve the links between policy planning and the budget. Before 2009, the budget had operated on a calendar-year basis. Ministries compiled plans in November, and Parliament passed the budget in December. There was no process to secure current-year funding for priorities that flowed from the February national retreats.

Rugwabiza said, "Because the leadership retreat happened in February, if new priorities emerged, they needed to be accounted for in plans of action and a budget adopted three months earlier." In the early years, ministries/agencies could come at the retreat and say they could not show progress on the previous year's goals because they hadn't received budget support until very late in the year. They could only move forward with some items by dropping others. "In the end, people went back to the retreat and admitted some priorities were not implemented because they didn't get the related resources. People came back to the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance because they needed to implement other budget items. Retreat priorities could not be allocated to the following year, as this would mean at minimum a delay of nine months," Rugwabiza said. "Before, we would try to integrate the leadership priorities into the budget revision that occurred after six months. Parliament and the ministries could revise the budget each semester. But this was difficult and did not work well."

In 2009, Rwanda joined the East African Community and adopted a July-to-June fiscal year. This shift allowed the Ministry of

Economic Planning and Finance’s Directorate of National Planning to better integrate the retreat into the budget. The new fiscal year allowed ministries time to include retreat priorities from February in their budgets, which the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance compiled into the Government Action Plan—the entire government’s budget—submitted to Parliament for approval in June.

The change in fiscal year helped Rwanda’s retreat align with the budget process and also saved ministries time by reducing reporting requirements. Previously, cluster action plans from the retreat had been separate from ministry action plans in the budget. Ministries would examine cluster action plans from the retreat and identify the action items that were their responsibility. However, ministries still had to do two sets of reporting. “The ministry did double reporting,” Rugwabiza explained. “One set of action plans went to the National Planning department for the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS) and the national budget, and another report went to the Coordination Unit for leadership retreat priorities,

at different times of year. Rwanda joining the East African Community was a lucky event that brought everything in line.”

Ministries complained about reporting to two different groups at two different times of year. The Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance responded to these complaints by merging the two sets of action plans. Figure 1 below illustrates the new process.

Rugwabiza said, “Now, we do a single, integrated plan of action. This alignment was made much easier because the leadership retreat now discusses a very small, targeted number of priorities. Before, when you had 200 actions, it was impossible to integrate them all into the budget.”

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Because retreat participants were not accustomed to focusing on a targeted set of goals, leaders had to push hard to change ways of thinking. During the first year of changes in 2009, disagreements over priorities were common. “We had a very big battle about the issue of priorities,” said Kimonyo, head of the SPU.

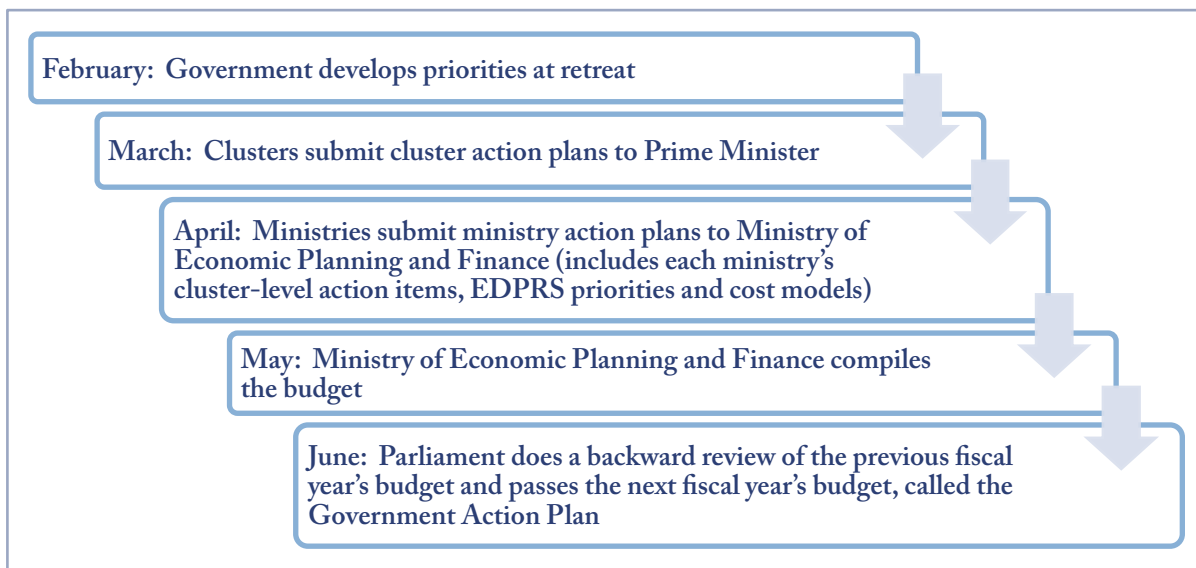


Figure 1: Priority and budget integration

“After all, just a few years ago, the government had not believed in priorities. It was about doing everything. Everything was a priority in our development process. We used not to accept having a few priorities because in the early stage of reconstruction after conflict, rebuilding the state required catering to all sectors at the same time. But, as our state building process matured, we needed to shift focus to some of the intractable issues.”

At the retreat and cabinet meetings, Kagame and Musoni made it clear that the new focus on priorities was critical to national planning and Rwandan development. Rugwabiza said, “The questions were on which priority, why is it still a priority, why is it a priority to be discussed at the retreat? Many things are a priority, but if it needs to be discussed at the retreat, then why?”

Follow-up was another challenge that required constant oversight. After the retreats, ministries continued to report gaps in implementation. Majoro said, “The challenges are often external. In addition to their retreat priorities, ministries generally have wish lists, or might be overambitious in their retreat priorities. We always want to achieve many things, but the financial means and skills are often problems. If ministries cannot secure the right set of skills in their employees, or secure a budget, this can really delay implementation. The retreats are a good forum to meet outside of the daily job and frankly discuss issues, but implementation is still an issue. It’s sometimes difficult to deliver without the budget or the proper skills, but it is easier now that budgeting and the retreat’s priorities are better aligned.”

Musoni pointed to the same shortcomings. “It is sometimes difficult to plan accordingly and tie the priorities to resources to implement them,” he said. “There are also issues with planning the stages or phases of implementation. For example, we want to distribute so many megawatts of energy, then breaking that down into resources

and more distinct timelines. We need more clarity around the stages and phases of implementation. Ministries need to better follow what is set down. These shortfalls are often reflected at the midyear reviews. We need to keep improving on implementation as a whole.”

ASSESSING RESULTS

The success of the efforts to revamp Rwanda’s retreats were measured, in part, by the participants’ ability to focus tightly on national strategies rather than toss together a loose list of wants and pet projects. “Before, people came out of the retreat with too many actions and activities to implement,” said Musoni, minister of cabinet affairs. Rugwabiza, director general of national development planning and research in the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance, said, “I remember a time when the Rwanda Development Board came out of the retreat with 80 actions to implement. These could not all be priorities.”

From 2009 to 2011, retreats became increasingly focused and productive. The number of national priorities agreed upon by participants fell every year—from 174 in 2009 to 11 in 2010 to six in 2011. The reduction in priorities stemmed from improved planning before the retreat, increased focus on pre-approved priorities at the retreat, and better monitoring of actions taken to address priorities.

Kimonyo of the SPU said, “The government used to say that since we were at the beginning of our development process, everything was a priority—a mentality that we should try to do everything. But this was far too much. Now, if you look at the different retreats that have happened, there are a few key issues that come up each year. These issues are intractable and important, and so we strategically focus on them.”

Participants said a greater focus on collective ownership and implementation of goals helped to break down barriers between ministries and

agencies. “Now, the preparation and decision making is quite lively,” Musoni said. “The energy and camaraderie of discussing and coming back creates a shared feeling of purpose: a unitary government, a feeling that this is a government that works together. The latest retreats have completely eradicated ‘this is *my* area, *my* ministry.’ Now, it is ‘*ours*—this is *our* government.’ If a colleague has difficulties in supporting an initiative, it becomes much easier because we deal better now with the common problems by focusing on how we can work together.” Majoro, of the Coordination Unit, said, “The retreat process is now a forum where the entire government shares a common understanding of our challenges and devises ways to solve these challenges.”

Given the alignment of priorities with the budgeting system in 2010–11, participants anticipated that implementation would improve when ministries received adequate resources to achieve their goals. The retreat process also became more inclusive. In 2010, Kagame for the first time invited Rwanda’s mayors, tying the retreat to the *imihigo* and national dialogue planning systems in place for mayors. The *imihigo* system involved mayors making annual service-delivery promises, monitored every year through a national dialogue—a retreat for mayors open to public involvement through cellphone texting, media coverage inside the retreat and radio call-ins. By inviting mayors to the national retreat, Kagame made it clear that local officials should incorporate national priorities into their policy making.

Some critics suggested that the retreats were less about consensus than about further centralizing Rwandan political authority within the presidency. The SPU, for example—a unit within the president’s office—had oversight of retreat planning. SPU staff mentioned that when they made a suggestion regarding a priority, ministry officials sometimes would immediately

assume that the suggestion came directly from Kagame and therefore had to be accepted. Other critics said the retreat process, run by the president, blurred the independent roles of the three branches of government because invitees included the head of the Senate, the head of the Chamber of Deputies, and senior officials in the judiciary.

Critics also mentioned that the retreat process still involved a degree of fear associated with the evaluation of progress by superiors. At the 2011 retreat, for instance, Kagame recalled the Rwandan ambassador to South Africa in front of all the participants, citing a lack of discipline. Others, however, indicated that the retreats had become much less stressful, especially for cabinet ministers, because of the preselection of priorities for discussion and the advance preparation of presentations. Rugwabiza said, “I think that the changes in the retreat were made with the realization that, if our planning system was strong enough, then the leadership retreat should not and would not be stressful for ministers. It became more of ‘let’s strategically discuss emerging issues that were not foreseen last year’ instead of ‘let’s discuss as much as possible, including foreseen issues that remained unplanned for or unimplemented.’”

REFLECTIONS

Between 2004 and 2009, Rwanda’s national leadership retreats, organized by President Paul Kagame as a strategic planning process for the country, were largely unproductive. Year after year, efforts to identify and implement key national priorities fell short because of poor planning and weak organization. However, a fundamental restructuring at the center of government, as well as dedicated efforts to enhance individual and institutional planning capacity, streamlined the retreat process and sharply improved the effectiveness of the annual gatherings.

Protai Musoni, minister of cabinet affairs and head of a steering committee that oversaw retreat planning, said, “Now, what we’re saying is that the retreat shouldn’t discuss the minute details of implementation. We discuss high-level priorities, feed those priorities down to technicians in the ministries, and make sure those priorities are translated in ministries’ action plans and in the budget.” Jean-Paul Kimonyo, director general of the Strategy and Policy Unit in the president’s office, said, “I think that people are learning the lessons faster. Before, it was really stressful for participants, but now it is more of a learning process.”

Members of the steering committee, the SPU and the Coordination Unit cited the role of the Africa Governance Initiative (AGI) in providing critical support. “We worked well together,” Musoni said. “They were very good at using different management tools, which we learned from and now use. When the Tony Blair team comes, they are like our staff. They are not different from any of our members, except that they have extra skill and knowledge for us to exploit.” AGI staff members stressed that their role in the changes was one of support, not ownership. Jonathan Reynaga, country leader for AGI in Rwanda during the retreat reforms, said, “We adapted to mindsets and added value. Development partners often have a set program, making them inflexible to changing

circumstances. Renegotiating a program can be excruciating, and so development partners sometimes end up doing everything themselves. However, we had a lot of support for what we did because we were doing what the government wanted us to do. We were flexible and in sync with the government.”

Leonard Rugwabiza, director general of national development planning and research in the Ministry of Economic Planning and Finance, said, “With the leadership retreat, you have high-level commitment. If you say, ‘We want to reduce the trade deficit,’ it’s the entire government—both centralized and decentralized—thinking toward this problem. You don’t have another forum where you get all the ministers, permanent secretaries, mayors, prime minister and president, with an understanding of what we need to do. In terms of sharing ideas, ministries could borrow success stories from other ministries. How was this issue unblocked in your ministry? How did you use that approach? How can you adapt it to others? Before, issues were thought to be specific to ministries, but at the end of the day you realize that we all face the same problems, yielding better collaboration.”

Musoni added, “On the whole, the new retreat is one innovation that really makes things much better than before. When I think of how it was, I often wonder, ‘How were we working like this?’ The retreat can only improve now.”

¹ James Munyaneza, “Kagame attacks cabinet ministers,” *All Africa News*, 15 February 2006 (<http://allafrica.com>).

² *All Africa News*, 15 February 2006.

³ Edwin Musoni, “Rwanda: Leadership retreat kicks off today,” *All Africa News*, 20 February 2010 (<http://allafrica.com>).

⁴ “President to leaders: Serve your country, not yourselves,” *New Times*, 21 February 2010 (<http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/index.php?i=14178&c=13>).

⁵ *New Times*, 21 February 2010.

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