



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

DELIVERING ON PROMISES: THE PRESIDENTIAL GOALS SYSTEM IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2012-2016

SYNOPSIS

At his August 2012 inauguration, Dominican Republic president Danilo Medina announced ambitious plans to increase economic growth and raise living standards—in particular by making health care more readily available, boosting literacy, and extending the school day for more than a million children. But in a country with a history of weak follow-through on policy promises and poor coordination among government institutions, fulfilling those commitments required firm political will and direction from the presidency. Medina and his chief of staff, Gustavo Montalvo, decided to use a management system created by the United Nations Development Programme’s Systems for Managing Governance (SIGOB) initiative in order to track progress on more than a hundred commitments developed in consultation with civil society groups during the campaign and transition. The SIGOB system helped ministries and agencies focus on the president’s priorities, kept the president informed on progress, and facilitated problem solving. At the end of Medina’s first term as president, the government had achieved some important successes, such as the implementation of a 911 emergency response system and expanded classroom time for most of the nation’s schoolchildren. A handful of the president’s commitments, however, had fallen behind schedule.

Blair Cameron drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in January and February 2016. Case published June 2016.

INTRODUCTION

“In 2012, we had many concrete ideas and very defined plans,” said Gustavo Montalvo, minister of the presidency (chief of staff) to the Dominican Republic’s newly inaugurated president, Danilo Medina. Executing those plans was a challenge, however. Previous administrations in the Caribbean island nation had struggled to follow through on policy commitments.

“The population had an enormous lack of confidence in government,” said Pedro Luis

Castellanos, who led Medina’s social policy working group during the campaign. “The people did not believe the government was capable of being honest and acting in accordance with what it said and with what it promised.”

Despite two decades of strong economic growth that saw per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) quadruple to almost US\$6,000 in 2012 from US\$1,500 in 1992, public services lagged.¹ Overcrowded schools, frequent power blackouts, and poorly equipped hospitals pointed to deficiencies in education, energy, and health. In the

lead-up to the election, thousands of residents had taken to the streets demanding the government spend 4% of the country's GDP on schools as stipulated by the country's General Education Law. Although the law had been in effect since 1997, the government had never contributed more than 2.5% of GDP toward education.²

Government offices had a “serious productivity problem” and did “not produce the results they should considering the quantity of employees they have,” said Marcos Villamán, president of the Instituto Global de Altos Estudios en Ciencias Sociales (Global Institute for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences), a public policy school in Santo Domingo, the capital city.

Beginning in 2010, Medina and Montalvo had organized working groups to consult with the private sector and civil society to identify government shortcomings and set policy priorities. Those priorities became part of the platform for the incumbent Dominican Liberation Party (known by its Spanish acronym PLD), of which they were both members. Among other commitments, Medina promised to raise education spending as required, and that pledge became a core part of the campaign.

After winning the May 2012 election with 51% of the vote, Medina appointed Montalvo to coordinate the presidential transition and develop a plan to execute his highest priorities after the August inauguration. “The promises of a candidate during the campaign have to be binding,” Montalvo said. But delivering on those promises required stronger monitoring of actions and results.

Both men agreed that the System for Presidential Goals, an online platform and goal management methodology developed by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) Systems for Managing Governance initiative (known by its Spanish acronym, SIGOB), could improve follow-through and help the new president achieve his goals (see Textbox: SIGOB in the Dominican Republic). The issue was how to roll out this new way of working and win the support of public servants.

THE CHALLENGE

Tracking progress and ensuring follow-through on government programs was no easy matter. In the Dominican Republic, a history of authoritarian governments had resulted in a highly centralized administration. Budget and policy decisions were concentrated in the president's office, and policy implementation was slow. Further, most ministries and government agencies had few staff with the training and motivation to manage policies and programs effectively. This capacity problem and the high degree of centralization made collaboration across government to implement shared priorities especially hard. “When the president himself establishes a priority, only then do ministries pay a lot of attention and attend to the president's request,” said Villamán.

The concentration of decision making was partly a legacy of authoritarian rule, and partly a product of the deals presidents cut to win office. Many of the existing ministers were PLD members who had been appointed by former president Leonel Fernández, who remained president of the party. Replacing PLD stalwarts could potentially disrupt party unity. As a result, a president could not always trust that senior officials could or would carry out the responsibilities delegated to them.

The capacity problem also had deep roots. The civil service was packed with political appointees who had few relevant skills. Past governments had created positions—and sometimes whole agencies—solely to provide jobs for political supporters. “If somebody worked on my political campaign, then I have to appoint him to a public position,” said Gregorio Montero, a former vice minister of public administration who became secretary-general of the United Nations Centro Latinoamericano de Administración para el Desarrollo (Latin American Center of Administration for Development) in 2012. “If I do not have a position to appoint him to, I create a new position for him. This was more of a historical problem, but we still have the

Box 1. SIGOB in the Dominican Republic

The UNDP-SIGOB project, launched in 1993, worked with national and local governments, mostly in Latin America, on technological solutions to improve a range of government processes. SIGOB consultants had first worked with the Dominican Republic government in 1997 on an initiative to improve tracking and archiving of documents within the president’s office.

The presidential goals system, which had been used by the Colombian government from 2002 to 2010 (see Textbox: The SIGOB Presidential Goals System in Colombia), was based on free software provided by SIGOB to report and monitor the progress of program implementation.

The system aimed to identify problems and devise solutions through a hierarchy of responsibility. The president chose the goals he wanted to achieve during his term and designated the ministries and agencies responsible for delivery. Ministers or agency directors selected institutional coordinators—usually high-level officials such as vice ministers—to supervise goal managers within their organizations. Goal managers ensured implementation of their respective goals. Institutional coordinators reported progress to their agency heads or ministers as well as the president’s office.

Goal managers defined intermediate targets, which set deadlines and laid out a path toward achieving an end goal. If the goal managers encountered an obstacle that was likely to impede progress, they would alert their institutional coordinators. The coordinators then tried to resolve the issue and, if necessary, convened a meeting of the institutional goals committee of key officials from their ministries or agencies. If the institutional goals group failed to solve the problem, the minister of the presidency convened a committee for presidential goals, which was a cabinet-level group of key ministers and those within the Ministry of the Presidency responsible for the execution of presidential goals.

The Dominican government had attempted to introduce presidential goals through SIGOB in 2004, during Fernández’s second term, but weak political will stifled implementation. “There were a few goals, but there was no follow-up mechanism,” recalled Montalvo. “The goals were never discussed with President Fernández, and there was no technical team to ensure execution.”

remnants—these redundant institutions that still exist.”

Management shortcomings aggravated this problem. Government posts often lacked clear goals, and there was no system for monitoring performance. In previous administrations, ministries had reported to the president just once a year. “In general, in underdeveloped countries like ours, there are no frameworks, no management systems, no established procedures, no solid plans to follow or guide us, no monitoring, and no indicators,” said Zoraima Cuello, who was part of Medina’s presidential transition team and was later appointed one of Montalvo’s vice ministers. “Of course, in some institutions there are plans and visions, but it is nothing that forms part of the culture of the institution.”

Lax management promoted corruption. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index 2011 ranked the Dominican Republic 129th out of 182 countries. Only four other nations from the Latin American and Caribbean region scored worse: Nicaragua, Paraguay, Venezuela, and Haiti.³ Individuals and companies often sought favors from those working in public administration. As a result, not all public officials would welcome stronger goal-setting and supervision.

Finally, the government also lacked a way to encourage collaboration across ministries and agencies on shared policies in such areas as public health or social services. Usually, ministries coordinated laterally only if the president intervened. “Coordination depends on the vision from the center of government,” said Villamán.

“Only those at the center can force the coordination that would make the government more effective.”

Recognizing that improved ability to deliver on promises was unlikely to come from the ministries themselves, at least in the short term, Montalvo concluded that only the center of government—the Ministry of the Presidency—could bolster the capacity to coordinate. Stronger involvement of the presidency in monitoring, trouble-shooting, and holding units to account would prove essential.

Fortunately, Medina and Montalvo knew one another well and could work together. “We were student leaders together, more than 40 years ago, at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo,” Montalvo said. Later, both held influential positions in the administration of Fernández, who was president from 1996 to 2000 and from 2004 to 2012.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

Medina used the three-month transition period between his election victory in May and the presidential inauguration in August to consolidate his priorities, transform them into specific goals, and build the team that would manage his center-of-government unit.

The UNDP provided financial and technical support to ensure a smooth transition between the Fernández and Medina administrations. The local UNDP office worked together with consultants from the SIGOB office to help advise Medina’s transition team.

Alternative management systems did not meet Montalvo’s requirements for a simple yet robust platform that could be adapted to local strengths and weaknesses. During the transition period, Montalvo met with staff from the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit in the United Kingdom to learn what former prime minister Tony Blair had done to achieve his policy goals. “We had the opportunity to learn a lot from the creator of the delivery unit,” said Montalvo. “But [the delivery unit] is a complicated methodology, and we did not think we had the maturity to develop it.”

The SIGOB presidential goals system, on the other hand, had proved successful elsewhere in Latin America (see Textbox: The SIGOB Presidential Goals System in Colombia), and because SIGOB consultants were already in the Dominican Republic to support the transition process, the system was the logical option for Medina and Montalvo to choose.

But before Medina could roll out the presidential goals methodology, he first had to decide on priorities and improve the government’s capacity to implement them.

Setting goals

Medina’s two-year campaign for the presidency had afforded him ample time to reflect on his nation’s problems and develop detailed policy solutions. At the start of his campaign, Medina had organized working groups in the areas of economic policy, social policy, and public administration reform. The aim was to analyze the 2010 National Development Strategy-Vision 2030—developed under the Fernández administration—and to draft practical policy priorities.

In the two years leading up to Medina’s election, the working groups had met weekly and collaborated with civil society leaders to define the needs that citizens considered most urgent. Medina had also invited policy experts to participate in the meetings for the topics he considered especially important, such as education. Positions were unpaid during the campaign period, but many participants hoped to secure government jobs after the election.

As the election neared, Montalvo invited more citizens and organizations to contribute policy proposals. “We started with just 8 or 10 people in each working group,” said Castellanos, head of the social policy group, but as the election neared, “it grew to nearly 500 people being involved” to contribute ideas and work out solutions. Castellanos said the participants

Box 2. The SIGOB Presidential Goals System in Colombia

In 2002, Colombian president Álvaro Uribe was looking for an information technology (IT) system to keep track of progress on policy implementation. Staff at the Sistema Nacional de Evaluación de Gestión y Resultados (National System for Evaluation of Management and Results, known as SINERGIA—part of the National Planning Department) planned to hire an IT company to develop such a system but soon found that the UNDP offered SIGOB's software for free. They decided to adapt the SIGOB system for their own requirements.

Manuel Fernando Castro, head of the SINERGIA office, said Uribe was a “micromanager” and that SINERGIA had to develop a tool that enabled the president to follow up on the details of implementation. Castro said the goal of working with SIGOB was “to monitor and provide information in real time about what is going on with government programs so that we would be able to inform the president on a regular basis.”

SINERGIA had been operating since 1994 and had greater capacity than the Directorate for Presidential Goals in the Dominican Republic. SINERGIA's own engineers refined the SIGOB presidential goal system for their own needs, for example, by coding a budget component into the system so that budget expenditure could be reported in parallel with progress toward goals.

SINERGIA's existing infrastructure provided one technical adviser for each government ministry. The advisers were charged with verifying the information that goal managers and institutional managers input into the system. “The technical officials reviewed and validated the information in the system to make sure sectors and agencies were not going to game the information and report they were doing more than they had actually done,” said Castro.

The Colombian government had difficulty prioritizing the most important goals. “Initially, we had 260, which later dropped to about 170,” said Castro, adding that his personal philosophy was “the fewer goals, the better,” because it allowed his team to focus more.

Colombia also chose not to implement a committee of presidential goals. Instead, SINERGIA's staff worked to resolve problems when alerts or restrictions were raised, and they called on the president and his cabinet chief for help when implementation hit roadblocks.

The Colombian system had far greater transparency than that of the Dominican Republic. “The system was made open to the public by the president's request,” said Castro. “Every citizen who wanted to know what was going on, how much money was being spent, the results of the programs, and so on could actually access the system and find that information.” Castro said some ministries initially opposed opening the information to the public and that it took a strong hand from President Uribe to bring everyone on board.

Castro said that giving the public access to the SIGOB website “reduced the incentive for gaming, because the people were able to figure out whether things were as advanced as [the ministries] were stating . . . In some cases, SIGOB users highlighted untrue information, and that mobilized us to verify things in the field,” he said.

Whereas some of the goals and targets did change throughout Uribe's eight years in government, those changes had to be negotiated with the president on a yearly basis, and ministers had to personally explain to the president why a goal had not been achieved. Castro said annual meetings created a strong incentive for agencies to deliver, because ministers knew that the president would review their performance.

Castro said that when he left SINERGIA at the end of Uribe's first term in 2006, “75% to 85%” of the goals had been achieved. He said that although Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe's successor, stopped using the SIGOB system when he became president in 2008, Santos's government used a similar system with many of the same components as the SIGOB platform.

“worked in subgroups based on specific topics—for example, health, education, and small and medium-size businesses.” The result was a blueprint outlining scores of potential policies with a particular focus on improving health and education.

After the May election, Medina’s campaign team began to focus on policy execution. The working groups met daily to plan the implementation of their proposals. “We worked intensely during those three months to operationalize the plan,” Cuello said.

UNDP-SIGOB consultants assisted the transition team and the president-elect in turning their priorities into targets that would become goals in the online system. But prioritization proved difficult. The number of goals ballooned to more than 100, to be implemented by 22 ministries and agencies (approximately half of the country’s ministries and agencies). “The UNDP team’s proposal was for 10 to 15 goals,” Cuello said. “They said 20 goals were too many and would become complex and unmanageable.” But having so few goals “was just impossible for us,” she said.

Many of the goals were interlinked. For example, in his inaugural address, Medina had unveiled ambitious education goals, including eliminating illiteracy within two years and improving student achievement (in 2011, the Dominican Republic ranked 82nd out of 115 countries on UNESCO’s Education for All Development Index, an indicator that measures progress toward improving education worldwide).⁴ However, improving literacy and pupil performance were partly related to school capacity. Public schools were so crowded the school day was split in three: one group of students attended classes for two or three hours in the morning, another group attended in the afternoon, and a third group attended in the evening. To overcome the problem, the new government announced that within four years it would build 18,000 school classrooms and have at least 80% of the nation’s students attending school for eight hours per day.

In health, as in education, the goals were big. Medina wanted to enter 1.3 million low-income

people into the national social security program, ensure that every municipality (a jurisdiction roughly comparable to counties in other countries) had at least one state-run pharmacy, and slash the maternal mortality rate to 50 in 100,000 from 115 in 100,000.⁵

Increasing capacity at the top

The Ministry of the Presidency—the coordinating body for government ministries—presided over the cabinet, which had little formal power and usually met just once a year to approve the president’s budget proposal. Montalvo, who had developed a reputation for leadership when he ran the campaign and the transition, was the logical choice for minister of the presidency. “Montalvo was extremely organized, like a soldier,” said the UNDP’s Berges. “Everybody knew what they had to do and his team was very disciplined.”

When Montalvo took over, the Ministry of the Presidency had very little capacity. “When we arrived to the ministry there was only a small staff working on financial administration,” Montalvo said. “A few people were in the technology area and maybe one in human resources. I don’t think anyone was working on planning.”

Montalvo created new positions and started recruiting staff from other government institutions and the private sector, relying on both his stature within the PLD and strong support from the president to ensure integrity in the process. “I made a condition that I would not work with anyone who did not meet my requirements, and if I was forced to, I would leave,” he said. “I said this to the president from the beginning.” Montalvo had demonstrated his commitment to integrity when he resigned from his earlier post in Fernández’s administration because of ethical concerns. This time, in spite of pressures from PLD officials and others within government to appoint insiders, Montalvo said, “I had the liberty to choose the staff I wanted.”

Montalvo, who had run a private consulting firm during his years out of government, said he placed a high priority on hiring people who were

dedicated to public service and who were technically and professionally competent. “You have to look at character, the type of person each one is,” he said. “For me to achieve results, I needed people who had morals as well as technical skills.”

Montalvo said that through his consultancy work, he “had the luck of interacting with the best technocrats in the country in both the public and private sectors.” He hired many such technocrats and also held public calls for applications. “I was especially criticized for holding a public hiring process and publicizing job postings through the media, because that was not the usual practice,” Montalvo said. He said he relied on strong support from Medina to overcome that opposition, much of which came from within his own party.

Montalvo selected Cuello as his vice minister in charge of the Directorate of Presidential Goals, a team of four coordinators responsible for implementing the SIGOB system. He had met Cuello when she was with the Inter-American Development Bank in the early 2000s and had hired her to a public administration job while with the Fernández administration in 2005. Together they turned to the job of making SIGOB work.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

After developing a clear governance plan and deciding on a system to achieve its goals, Medina named his cabinet. He appointed to ministerial or vice-ministerial roles many of those who worked on his governance plan and his campaign, and also reappointed several of Fernández’s ministers.

According to Cuello, the new president asked the ministers to organize small groups to “analyze what was happening in each government sector at that moment and to define what should continue and what could be improved.”

Streamlining structures

Having a greater number of competent staff gave Montalvo more capacity within his office, but he still had to organize coordination of the country’s approximately 50 ministries and agencies.

New public administration regulations, which Fernández had signed into law during his final week in office, helped pave the way by vesting the Ministry of the Presidency with broad powers. “The [new] law established that the Ministry of the Presidency was in charge of monitoring everything that depended on the president,” Cuello said. “It also established that all of the independent commissions that did not belong to any specific ministry would be under the control and coordination of the Ministry of the Presidency.”

During his first weeks in office, Medina disbanded six older commissions and created new organizations to coordinate work on goals that would be difficult to implement because of overlapping government responsibilities, such as the creation of a 911 call center for dispatching medical staff, police, and firefighters in emergencies. Montalvo said the Dominican Republic’s “presidentialist” culture meant it would have been impossible for the agencies involved to coordinate implementation of this operationally complex goal among themselves. “The respect, the follow-up, and the attention paid to these priorities by the police, by the Ministry of Health, etcetera, are only because the president is involved,” he said.

Montalvo appointed directors to each of the new organizations and ordered them to report back to him regularly, usually monthly. He played a direct role in managing the organizations working on the goals he considered most complex, such as the 911 system. He set up meetings every two weeks with the head of the police, the minister of health, the attorney general, and other high-ranking officials involved in emergency response. And he said that despite the amount of time he had to devote to this one goal, it was critical for him to be in charge. “If it had been organized by any other public official, no one would pay attention,” Montalvo said. “They would just send a secondary-level official [to the meetings], and there would be no results.”

The Ministry of the Presidency had little problem getting the additional funding required for its expansion, because the president decided

the budget with only minimal input from cabinet ministers or the legislature. “The budget was presented to Congress and was approved exactly as it had been presented,” Montalvo said. “We justified and explained why we needed the budget increase: There were new projects, new initiatives, and new commissions that would be coordinated by the Ministry of the Presidency.”

Defining responsibilities

Before finalizing the details of some of his goals, Medina waited to hear back from the working groups he had assigned to analyze the capacity of each government ministry and agency. In some cases, the groups uncovered information that required Montalvo’s staff to revise a goal. “One thing was what we had on paper, with general data and information, and another thing was what you found when you looked inside the institution,” said Cuello. The working groups found that some organizations lacked resources, had damaged equipment, or had exaggerated their results under the previous administration. Knowing the true status of projects and the resources available to each ministry or agency helped the president and his staff make decisions about moving forward. “That was the first 100 days in government,” said Cuello. “Find the information, review it, present proposals, and take action: plan, make, verify, act.”

The UNDP continued to provide technical support after Medina took office, and the SIGOB team that had helped with the transition stayed on to support the government staff working on the presidential goals system. During the first few months of the administration, the presidential goals team—the Directorate for Presidential Goals, comprising the four coordinators responsible for implementing SIGOB—worked closely with the UNDP consultants to learn about SIGOB methodology and the online platform. The team then input the final 113 presidential goals to the SIGOB online platform. In November, Cuello began contacting ministers and agency directors to present the presidential goals applicable to each organization. The introductory meetings included

Cuello, the goals team, and the UNDP-SIGOB consultants.

Each of the 22 ministries and agencies responsible for the presidential objectives had 2 to 15 goals. For organization heads the first task was to designate goal managers. “The goal manager has direct responsibility for ensuring the goal gets achieved,” said Cuello. In addition to designating a goal manager for each individual goal, ministers or agency directors had to choose an institutional coordinator. Cuello said coordinators were always “someone of high importance within the institution who had authority over all the goal managers and who could help them solve problems.”

Víctor Sánchez, a vice minister and institutional coordinator at the Ministry of Education, said the minister chose goal managers who usually were heads of departments in the areas that corresponded best with the specific goals. In the Ministry of Education, an assistant helped each goal manager monitor implementation and report progress in the system, though in other ministries the goal manager performed that task.

In the initial meeting and in follow-up workshops, Cuello, her team, and the consultants trained goal managers and coordinators how to use the new system and gave ministers the opportunity to add more goals or add more detail to existing goals. “If staff at a ministry believed we were missing something, they could share their opinion and we adjusted or added to the system,” Cuello said.

Because high-level officials from some ministries had participated in the working groups during the campaign and transition periods, senior ministry staff often were aware of the presidential goals for which they would be responsible. There were exceptions, however. “We were called to the presidential palace and told what the goals were. They handed out a list of goals for each ministry,” said Radhamés Martínez, vice minister of tourism. “We did not know that the president had been working on anything like this. It was a big surprise.”

Although most ministers responded positively to the goals Cuello presented, others said ministries should have more autonomy to define their priorities. “I remember one experience I had with a minister who dismissed the system and treated us relatively badly,” she said. “He said that, as minister, he should get to decide the ministry’s goals and that he should work directly with the president, not with us.”

Backed by Medina and Montalvo, Cuello was able to persuade those resisting change that the SIGOB platform was a useful tool for tracking progress and that it could make their jobs easier.

Work began immediately on goals to be implemented by commissions within the Ministry of the Presidency itself, such as the 911 emergency system. For those goals, Cuello and her team had no need to persuade staff to adopt the SIGOB system. All of the commissions reported directly to Montalvo.

Bringing staff up to speed

Although the president and his staff had decided on broad goals, individual organizations were responsible for defining intermediate targets and inputting them into the SIGOB system. For the system to be effective, the Ministry of the Presidency had to cultivate buy-in from the new goal managers and institutional coordinators.

One effective method of persuasion was to explain the importance of the system to the country’s progress and the system’s significance as a link with the president, said Edgar Reyes, a computer engineer on the goals team. “First, I present what the system looks like and how it works,” Reyes said. “Then I explain how much importance the president places on the system and how significant the system is for the Dominican population. I talk about how the system is a solution for relaying information about problems, alerts, and delays.”

Loyda Matos, who had been in the telecommunications industry and who, like Reyes, became a coordinator of presidential goals, said it was crucial that individual institutions set their own targets (intermediate goals). The whole

process was done “with the understanding that the people within the institutions are the experts in the background information and the institutional processes,” she said.

The goals team and the UNDP coordinators helped goal managers choose meaningful intermediate targets and showed them how to upload those targets to the online platform. Taken together, the intermediate goals represented a step-by-step strategy to achieve the intended final result.

The goals team next trained managers how to use the online system. Each manager had to create a unique online profile on the password-protected presidential goals website. Using their online profiles, goal managers could log in to the system to report what they had done toward achieving their specific goals. “Each step of progress they take, they make an update,” Reyes said. The updates were visible to institutional coordinators, the heads of the institutions, and the goals team, as well as Cuello, Medina, and Montalvo. Initially, each ministry’s postings could not be viewed by other ministries or by the public. Cuello said the president planned to eventually open the system to the public so that citizens could pressure ministries and agencies that fell behind on their goals.

Although some goal managers were initially apprehensive about the time and effort required to make frequent reports and updates, their concerns eased as they became familiar with the system and procedures. “It looked like a huge amount of extra work that I did not have time for,” said Mariza de la Cruz, a goal manager in the Ministry of Public Administration. “But over time, it became just a small part of my day-to-day work.”

The training process took about a year. “There were various meetings, sometimes one-on-one, and the UNDP brought in several other consultants and experts in different areas to provide training—for example, for managing records, for planning, for structuring intermediate goals, and for managing a system of indicators,” said goals team member Roberto Ramírez.

Goal managers’ most difficult task was to create indicators that measured progress toward a

specific goal. For some of the goals, no relevant indicators existed.

Throughout the training process, members of the goals team made sure they were available to help goal managers and institutional coordinators use the system. The goals team was “very reachable,” said Maricell Silvestre, the institutional coordinator at the Export and Investment Center of the Dominican Republic, a government agency responsible for promoting exports and foreign investment. “If we need to chat with them because we do not understand something in the platform, they arrange a meeting to help. It is a very direct channel of communication.”

As the goals team became more comfortable with managing the system and the goal managers, the UNDP consultants became less involved. “We were learning on the job,” Ramírez said. “Eventually, we got to a point where the UNDP understood that we had all the training we needed to run workshops and provide follow-up for all the components of the system. They progressively passed more roles on to us until we were managing the whole system independently.”

Keeping the team focused

Because the system’s effectiveness required everyone involved to pay close attention to timeliness and responsibility, personal follow-up was essential. Reyes, Matos, and Ramírez worked to ensure that goal managers updated their progress regularly. The goals team pressed delinquent managers to fulfill their duties and investigated delays. The president and his chief minister used the online platform only rarely and instead relied on Cuello to relay important information on progress and obstacles.

When institutional coordinators did not respond to requests from the goals team or Cuello, Montalvo would step in. “The support from the minister of the presidency was fundamental,” Cuello stressed. “He has direct conversations when there are serious difficulties. . . . He tells the ministers that the goals team has been facing a lot of resistance from within the institution and that

they are neither documenting things nor offering support.”

The goals team also fostered collaboration among organizations whose work intertwined. “Sometimes a conflict of interest makes progress difficult, and we have to search for win-win solutions at both personal and institutional levels,” Cuello said. The goals team could use the online platform to identify which person at which institution was responsible for completing the next step in the process to implementing a specific goal. If progress stalled because of a conflict with another government institution, Cuello or Montalvo would step in and negotiate a solution.

Occasionally, implementation bogged down because staffers lacked the motivation or the technical skills to do their jobs. “There are people responsible for certain areas of execution who search for problems that make them unable to move forward; they just complain and make a lot of excuses,” Cuello said. “But really, it is often the case that those people don’t have the technical skills or the management ability required, and they just look for any other justification for no progress.”

Cuello said she and the goals team worked one on one with individuals who had such problems. “If the person had a good attitude but lacked training, we generated a process to provide as much training and support as was necessary,” she said. “There are some people the goals team has had to train more than 10 times” to use the system.

If training was not the problem, Cuello recommended removing goal managers or institutional coordinators from their positions. Although political considerations complicated efforts to replace some workers, Montalvo said he and Medina were open to replacing workers at all levels within the system. “We made ministerial changes and institutional coordinator changes, as well as changes in people working at the intermediate level,” Montalvo said.

Turnover contributed to delay. “When there is a ministerial change, the new minister or director generally changes the whole team, and then we

have to retrain and reexplain everything to do with the system,” Cuello said. “This obviously means a lot of extra work for us because we have to start from zero. It happened in the Ministry of Health, and in several other ministries there have also been major personnel changes. It means we have to revise everything and that the new minister, too, has to revise and validate all the information” within the system.

Solving problems

The SIGOB methodology aimed to identify problems quickly and minimize delays that might arise from unexpected snags. Goal managers could use the online platform to alert their institutional coordinators about obstacles that required outside help, and if a goal manager missed an intermediate goal deadline, the alert was raised to a higher priority called a *restriction*. Because coordinators usually met with their goal managers at least once a month, such alerts rarely came as surprises. Usually, coordinators would work with goal managers to develop solutions before deadlines were missed.

The goals team in the Ministry of the Presidency provided support and maintained a dialogue with goal managers who were struggling with implementation. “We regularly review all the goals—especially those that are behind schedule for some reason,” Reyes said. “These goals need more follow-up and more help to find solutions to any obstacles. We review each step forward and help the goal managers achieve their objectives.”

Institutional coordinators could also convene senior officials within their ministries or agencies to identify alternative ways to solve especially difficult problems. Such institutional committees often included the head of the organization, the institutional coordinator, and all other officials who might be able to help with the situation, such as human resource managers, the director of communications, or legal support staff. “All of the officials within an institution can get together at a table and work through any problems they are facing to try to solve them,” Matos said. “In theory, the institutional meetings should include

the highest-ranking officials (such as the minister or agency director). But sometimes, due to their complicated agendas, they are not involved as closely as we would like. . . . The ideal—and what the methodology indicates—is that the maximum authority within an institution should be there.”

When an institutional coordinator decided the relevant ministry or agency was unable to surmount a problem, the SIGOB methodology called for escalating the situation to a committee of presidential goals that would include all key ministers and high-ranking officials within the administration. In the Dominican Republic, the committee of presidential goals was never implemented because it was too difficult to get all of the relevant officials together in one room. As a result, particularly challenging problems that reached this level went first to the goals team and then to Cuello. “If it is a situation that merits direct contact with the minister, I contact that minister directly,” Cuello said. “I do everything I can to see that problems get solved within the institution.”

Cuello brought a situation to Montalvo’s attention only if the situation was especially serious or if it involved one of the president’s highest priority goals. “I am a filter in this process,” she said. “If no solution is possible within the institution, I can escalate it to the minister of the presidency. He can meet with the other institutions that could get involved: perhaps the directorate for the budget of the president or the comptroller office if it is a payment problem or perhaps the legal consultant if it is something that needs a law change or a decree to advance.”

The most common problems involved finances. Ministers or goal managers often complained that allocated budgets were not sufficient to achieve their goals. Only the president could change the budget for a particular goal, and his response to a request for additional funding depended on the priority of the goal. For the most important goals, Medina could assign new resources, but in other cases, Montalvo would direct Cuello to adjust outputs or deadlines to match the existing resources.

Because his core campaign promises centered on education, Medina dealt personally with issues related to goals in that sector. “If anything happens that involves education, we always address it directly with the president,” Cuello said. “He has worked in a very direct manner when problems have arisen that the Ministry of Education cannot itself overcome. When there were problems with financing payments for the construction of new classrooms, the president met with everyone involved to look for alternatives.”

The Ministry of the Presidency relied on institutional coordinators to verify the accuracy of the goal managers’ progress reports rather than conducting audits. “We always request documents or other means of verification,” said Sánchez, the institutional coordinator at the Ministry of Education. “For example, we request a list of all of the classrooms constructed and the date they were inaugurated. We ask [the goal managers] questions, and if necessary, we send someone to make a field visit and verify whether the reports are accurate. . . . But generally, there is a culture that people report things as they are.”

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Some of the goals ran into obstacles that the goal managers, the institutional coordinators, and the team in the Ministry of the Presidency were unable to resolve. One of the major difficulties stemmed from the government’s own complex requirements regarding the procurement of goods and equipment. Castellanos said rules and regulations for public purchasing made it impossible to move quickly to achieve short-term results. “It is a very complicated financial system,” he said. “All of the rules and regulations make progress slow.”

A highly structured purchasing process required the solicitation of bids for even the smallest pieces of equipment. “If I want to buy some chairs for an office, I have to issue a tender,” Castellanos explained. “I have to allow three months for all those interested in selling chairs to make proposals. I have to give them another month to organize their proposals. Afterward, I

have to make an allocation. And after that, I have to submit forms to the *contraloría* [the public auditor] to get the authorization to make the purchase. It ends up taking over a year to do something as silly as buying a chair!”

The time-consuming purchasing system caused problems in the implementation of the 911 emergency system, among other goals. According to the public procurement law, contracts to buy equipment had to be verified and reviewed by the public auditor. Complaints from companies in the bidding process could cause delays, which sometimes lasted months.

In some cases, institutional committees or Montalvo himself would authorize temporary solutions. For example, when the procurement process caused delays in the arrival of ambulances, the 911 commission decided to hire ambulances from the Dominican Red Cross so as not to delay operations, said Marisol Castillo, a member of the project team. And when there was a delay in implementing radio communication equipment for the 911 emergency responders, the team decided to use existing equipment the agencies already had until the new equipment had been bought and tested, Castillo said. Although the workarounds enabled managers to meet their deadlines, the quality and consistency of service was relatively low until the new equipment was put in operation.

ASSESSING RESULTS

The SIGOB goals system helped the president focus 22 government institutions on priority policies. The president’s staff and civil servants praised the online system and the snapshot of government activity it provided. “We can see very quickly which areas are working well, which are on time, and which have alerts,” Vice-Minister of the Presidency Zoraima Cuello said.

Radhamés Martínez, the institutional coordinator at the Ministry of Tourism, said his colleagues appreciated the new focus on achieving results. “With the presidential goals there is a specific work plan to achieve the goal,” he said. The new system helped his ministry generate a 22% increase in tourist numbers from 4.6 million

in 2012 to 5.6 million in 2015, though Martínez was quick to point out that the tourism sector had also benefited from the buoyant US economy. The Ministry of Tourism would have to attract even greater tourist numbers to achieve its original goal of 10 million tourist visits per year by 2022.

In terms of improving overall implementation rates and goal achievement, however, the full impact of the new system was unclear as of mid-2016. A May 2016 report from the Ministry of the Presidency said 6.4% of 205 total goals had been achieved and 91.1% were on schedule to be achieved.⁶ However, Montalvo said that as well as adding new goals, many of the original goals had been changed, making evaluation difficult. Further, there was no baseline for comparing rates of progress after the introduction of SIGOB with rates of progress before. And crucially, the information contained in the SIGOB system was not public—only 200 to 300 government officials had password access.

It was impossible to give equal attention to each of the president's goals, given the large number—205 in all, compared to the 10 to 15 the consultants had urged the government to choose. Montalvo and his colleagues concentrated on those the president seemed to pay more attention to himself. Within this group, achievement or completion varied with scope or feasibility, need for collaboration across ministries, and the complexity of the task.

The president had several high priorities in education, for example. He exceeded his promise to spend 4% of GDP on education, allocating 4.3% in 2014, a decision almost wholly under the control of his office. Other education priorities lagged. School construction, for example, required collaboration with the public works ministry, the education ministry, and the president's office, and inter-ministerial collaboration was still weak. The government built almost 7,000 classrooms and renovated 3,000 others as of December 2014, but the Ministry of Education was well behind on its original goal to build 28,000 and renovate 23,130 of the already existing 35,000 classrooms by the end of the president's first term.⁷ "One of the

weakest things is still coordination between institutions," said the UNDP's Berges. But "the presidential goals system is trying to change that."

In other instances feasibility was the issue. The illiteracy rate decreased from 8.7% in 2012 to 7.1% in 2015, but it was highly unlikely that the goal of eliminating illiteracy would be accomplished for many years.⁸ Alfonso Aisa, who worked for the Spanish Cooperation Agency on education programs in the Dominican Republic, said the president's goal of 100% literacy was impossible to achieve even in ideal circumstances. "It is not easy to teach someone to read and write," he said. "You cannot just provide a six-month course and suddenly students are literate. . . . The president was overly optimistic."

Some of the goals where progress was strongest—and those most well received by the public—were ones implemented by new organizations within the Ministry of the Presidency, such as the 911 emergency system. As of early 2016, the system operated only in and around Santo Domingo, but the 911 commission was planning to expand the system to Santiago, the second-largest city after the capital, and eventually, nationwide.

Medina's quick action on policy priorities helped boost his popularity. His approval rating soared to 90% in 2013 and 2014, although successful renegotiation of a gold-mining contract with a multinational company and a program called Surprise Visits from the President also likely contributed to favorable public opinion.⁹ Under the Surprise Visits program, Medina traveled to a different rural community every Sunday to check on policy implementation and offer microcredit and other support to farmers and small businesses. The Ministry for the Administration of the Presidency, an institution parallel to the Ministry of the Presidency that dealt more with administrative issues such as staffing and finances, ran the program. It used a separate SIGOB platform to follow up on commitments made by the president during his surprise visits. The platform was open so that the public could track progress online.

As a first step towards greater follow-up and accountability, the introduction of the SIGOB presidential goals system was important. In his February 2016 state-of-the-union address, the last of his first term as president, Medina highlighted the improved capacity of the Ministry of the Presidency, something that Rosario Espinal, a Temple University sociology professor from the Dominican Republic, said even the public had begun to notice. In past governments, “the minister of the presidency was someone who helped the president . . . but it wasn’t clear to the public with what,” she said. “This time around, people see the minister of the presidency as being in charge of implementing programs and focusing on public policy.”

REFLECTIONS

Minister of the Presidency Gustavo Montalvo stressed that top-level attention to detail played a significant role in the implementation of the SIGOB presidential goals system. “We have had a lot of success in many projects simply because we get involved,” said Montalvo of himself and President Danilo Medina. “We follow up sometimes even on the small details.”

Initially there were big differences among ministries’ capacities and political wills when it came to executing the president’s priorities, but those differences began to disappear. Although political issues still held back some of the ministries, the United Nations Development Programme’s Anyarlene Berges said that in most instances, “the presidential goals changed the culture of the ministries to work for a result.”

Some critics worried that Medina’s reforms placed even more power in the presidency. Carlos Pimentel of Participación Ciudadanía (Citizen Participation), the local chapter of Transparency International, said that Dominicans associated the new programs with the president, not with the

government. Further, new spending expanded opportunities for patronage. Pimentel suggested the president should not have created new organizations within the president’s office to implement priority goals and instead should have charged existing ministries with implementation.

Montalvo said the president planned to delegate the new programs created by the Ministry of the Presidency to ministries in the future. He said that, for example, the literacy program “will eventually be transferred completely to the Ministry of Education” but that it “was absolutely necessary” to initially run the implementation of complex goals directly from the Ministry of the Presidency “because of the high level of coordination involved.”

If accountability was the aim, making the targets public and periodically reporting to citizens on progress was important, if not in the start-up phase, then in the future. Other countries had done so, and without this information, it was impossible for citizens to help leaders monitor results. Zoraima Cuello, Montalvo’s vice minister in charge of the presidential goals, said the president had plans to make the system publicly accessible, and then “citizens could generate pressure on goal managers to achieve their targets.”

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