

Center of Government Meeting UN-ISS-Tony Blair August 9-10, 2017

In all countries, the capacity of the “center of government,” especially the cabinet office, profoundly affects the quality of decision making, inter-governmental coordination, and communication. Structures and procedures that may seem “just technical” shape the political context and vice-versa. Understanding how the political and the technical interact is a key to better governance.

This meeting brought together principals from cabinet offices to share experiences and advise one another as well as to generate insight that can inform general guidance.

Overview:

“Center of government” refers to the cabinet office and other institutions in the president’s office or prime minister’s office that carry out several key functions.

- Focus the agenda on priorities
- Screen policy proposals/documents for quality
 - Legal review
 - Financial review
 - Stakeholder consultation
 - Reasoning/options
- Monitor deadlines
- Support inter-ministerial coordination
- Oversee follow-up/ implementation
- Manage strategic communication
- Political liaison with other branches of government

In some countries the center of government also has specific structures for

- Dispute resolution and dialogue functions mediated by a trusted outsider or civil society coalition leaders
- Monitoring and follow-up, trouble-shooting
 - Delivery units or performance monitoring systems
 - Independent external monitors (some unity governments)
- Partnerships with external implementers
- development boards, strategy groups

Some simple devices for improving cabinet office performance are:

- Draft a **cabinet manual** so ministries prepare policy documents more carefully and know what to send forward
- Establish **sub-committees** to improve coordination among ministers whose work interacts
- Hire policy analysts to **review policy documents** for completeness
- Empower the chief of staff or cabinet secretary to **screen proposals** for the agenda and **maintain a tracker, report out to the press.**

Consequences of a poorly functioning Center of Government

- The policy decisions that reach the cabinet lack adequate information about options, budgetary impact, legal implications, or stakeholder perspectives.
- Meetings, agendas, and deadlines catch ministers by surprise.
- Policy decisions aren't implemented. A recent World Bank study, which drew on the experiences of African countries, found that 2/3 of decisions weren't implemented.
- Routine administrative issues consume scarce time at cabinet office meetings, pushing priorities off the agenda.
- Cabinet meetings are excessively long (many hours) and reduce the time ministers have to do their jobs.
- Coordination across ministries is difficult.
- Senior decision makers do not know the status of priority programs and projects.
- Members of the public and key stakeholders do not understand what the chief executive seeks to accomplish.

Setting Priorities

One function of a cabinet office or center of government is to help set priorities. We often think about priorities as flowing from a vision, broadly shared. They are the goals that help advance the vision. But especially in conflict-affected situations, immediate priorities may be to unblock obstacles to reconstruction or do something that people want and the government can deliver, even with limited capacity.

Priorities and the concrete goals created to fulfill them often arise out of intersecting processes, such as forums that bring all political parties together, national retreats that include civil society representatives and other leaders, and visioning exercises that include surveys and conversations with citizens and civic leaders. In the very short term, however, the imperatives may be to create the security that allows these conversations to happen and to reduce major impediments to reconstruction and rehabilitation, such as repair of ports, restoring central bank operations, etc.

Contexts evolve. Achieving one set of goals successfully makes it possible to move on to others. For example, securing peace or unity might precede responsiveness to some other basic needs, which in turn may come before goals that advance broad social transformation or help the country create economic opportunities based on its comparative advantage.

There is always a temptation to pursue too many priorities at once, because everything seems important. However, we have to ask: "What do we have the resources (time, money, skills) to do? To succeed, it is important to limit the list, plan to pursue goals sequentially as contexts change, and manage public expectations accordingly.

It's just hard to define priorities. If we focus on roads—we still need energy. And so on. It gets out of hand. But if you try to do too many things you will be pulled into mediocrity.

The benefits of government actions will largely lie in the future. In the interim, it is important to build credibility and hope, among the initial priorities should be a “big results fast”-type goal—something that people value and that will have an immediate effect on livelihoods or capacity to earn a living. (There are high popular expectations. Everyone wants something immediately. This approach helps.)

- Project yourself as an agent for improvement of citizens’ conditions—and for immediate change. Focus on at least one aspect of service delivery.
- Invest in small development projects that can be implemented quickly, not big projects. Focus on things that empower—the enable people to improve their own lives more easily. Limit these projects to 3 months. For example, clean up the streets, rehabilitate wells.
- You need some incremental wins. People haven’t seen much success from government, so they need to be able to see “performance.” In Liberia, President Sirleaf had a saying “small like today, big like tomorrow.” Begin with small improvements like getting streets lit or installing generators in hospitals and then gradually build to expansion of the electrical grid.

Articulating a vision that makes the rationale behind the priorities clear helps inspire civil servants and citizens both. Many governments fail to inspire, and they find it hard to build capacity and have an impact as a result. “We have a Vision 20XX with specific deliverables. Each year deliver something that people can look at and see progress.”

- “I submit that if the center of government doesn’t have responsibility for vision, it should.” You must limit priorities to succeed. It is easier to do that if there is a vision about where you want to be five years down the road. It provides an anchor for everything you do.
- You find yourself sometimes with something you have to do—Ebola, for example—and that changes everything. You are in the best position to do it if you have previously established a vision that people have come to share.
- Vision statements can’t be too long. They are organizing statements, part of communications strategy. Move on to how you will achieve the vision—government plans, how you going to implement the strategy to attain the vision.

There are competing needs. Always be prepared to come up with things that address the needs of the here and now.

Democracies assume many forms. The form of democracy imported from the west is not always helpful. Think about the underlying principles. It’s all about focusing on citizens. Deliver what improves the lives of ordinary citizens. Reach out to citizens. Promote a citizen-centered ethic of service.

Some countries create annual leadership retreats to adjust priorities as conditions change and identify rising challenges. This step can assist implementation and help ministers and their deputies focus on emerging priorities.

We talk a lot about prioritization. What is prioritization for? Are the priorities the things to which president should allocate weight or do we mean something else? Are the priorities mainly a tool for aligning interests? Are they vehicles for communicating?

Special challenges arising from context

This session put many challenging issues on the table.

One participant distinguished between “peace that is absence of violence” and a second stage where “peace is really coming together.” Peace and development have to work together, however. They interact.

Is there a dilemma about whether to engage in peacebuilding, on the one hand, or delivery, on the other? Are the “technical” and “the political” distinct? Several participants took issue with the dichotomy.

- Instead, ask what is it that a government needs to do to think of itself as legitimate? In that context the distinction between political and delivery is false. The latter is essential to addressing the first. Leaders will stumble if they don't understand this issue. “Try not to get bogged down too much on balancing act. Do as much as you can wherever you can begin. Just because you can do it, do it!”
- In aftermath of something bad happening, we see people lining up for help from president. But that's not institutionalizing service delivery. How we frame question is key. Don't present political v. technical as a tension. They are not mutually exclusive, and one way to bring about compromise is to bring in a time variable: Introduce “sustainability.” Neither peace nor development is sustainable without the other. Opportunism is good. Look for things you can really do now. Don't wait until everyone is in agreement. In the process you respond to the immediate needs of people and you change the subject in a constructive way.

Coalition governments, unity governments

Many conflict-affected countries have coalition governments, or even unity governments in which the incumbent and opposition parties try to govern together.

- One of challenges is that when a country has a powersharing government, people take powersharing as an end in itself. Everyone becomes accountable to parties because parties are always represented at the table. As a result, there is no unity on what is to be delivered.
- Focus on procedure. Unless there is a strong political settlement, there isn't a clear platform for delivery. If politics are unstable, the cabinet shuffles every year. It is much easier to make

progress on delivery if there is more stability in appointments. But sometimes it is possible to make progress by focusing on procedure and how to improve the speed and quality of delivery. (see below)

- An aim ought to be to enable the cabinet, working with the cabinet office, to resolve administrative issues or minor conflicts before they escalate and land on the crowded agenda of the head of government or the head of state. That means the head of state would only touch issues that couldn't be resolved.
- One coalition government set up a think tank that works with the coalition outside the formal system of government and helps to facilitate delivery.

Additional challenges.

- A new government inherits the old structure and system, including an army that may be ethnically distinct or aligned with a party or faction. A pressing question is how deal with that. You can't get rid of politicized civil servants because they are the repository of knowledge. So how do you deal with software part of this—change attitudes in civil service?
- If the former regime was highly centralized and autocratic, the need to change thinking and behavior may have some special dimensions. Say you want to push some of the decisions back to the ministries so that ministries become a source of ideas. How do we re-train people to play those roles?
- Sometimes parts of the country remain under the control of an armed faction. The question is how to reach the citizens who live in those areas.
- A legacy of authoritarian government is the perception that government is illegitimate. A priority is to rebuild trust. Reaching out to civil society and religious leaders is important as part of this process. That discussion must take place in public, for all to see. Another step is to redraft the law so that civil servants are not all political appointees.
- In new democracies, the tensions are high because resources are scarce. In industrial democracies, candidates and their campaign workers can find other jobs if they lose, but in low resource conflict-affected countries, there are few options. We have to get to a point where it's not a do or die thing.

Regional disparities can be especially disruptive in post-conflict contexts, when communities compare how well they are doing and decide whether to support the government or not on that basis. Do we have any examples of deft handling of regional differences and geographical inclusiveness?

- Don't let any segment of society go down the cracks.

Sharing out cabinet portfolios is a tactic people sometimes consider, but this practice leaves a bad legacy. Some governments have had as many as 100. It is hard to retrench later, and it is expensive and ineffective to have too many people, especially if most are amateurs and have no background in the subject of their portfolios. Think carefully before going down that path.

Procedure & Policy Coordination

Procedures & Policy Coordination

People look to the center especially in times of crisis. You need a competent center and you need to centralize (in the government, not in a person) before decentralizing. Work practices are more important than organigrams and powerpoints.

You have a short period after coming to office to do something. How can you develop the capacity to act?

Establish clear lines of authority/structure

- Sometimes there is a national reconciliation pact that on paper makes little sense. Or the constitution sets forth a semi-presidential system with a prime minister and a president—but offers little clarity about their respective roles. As head of government, you have to move on. You need an orderly process. What can you do?
- Ministers should meet with the prime minister, DGs with ministers. No mail should go around the lines of authority. Weigh risks. You need to build an institutional structure. If everyone contacts the prime minister, nothing good will happen.
- If the constitution sets out reporting lines that make no sense or provide recipes for trouble, ask the president to authorize the prime minister to do X...for practical reasons. The second man can be a convenor. The president doesn't have to do all the convening.
- Clarifying the division of responsibility and creating coordination mechanisms are two important steps. For example, consider rethinking the role of planning agencies and planning ministries. Is it a good idea to have them if the finance ministry carries out many of the same functions? What does the planning ministry bring to the table? Is it worth the expense? How will it coordinate with the finance ministry? Some countries have merged these ministries.
- Do not allow different security services to report to different leaders—this arrangement creates permanent problems.
- In many authoritarian governments or conflict-affected states, government is centralized in a person. Cabinet is weak and coordination resides completely with the president. Yet it is dangerous to escalate something if you want to resolve it. The way out of this problem is to have cabinet meetings, cabinet retreats, permanent secretary retreats, a separate think tank to

help define agendas and resolve conflicts, a strong role for the finance ministry in planning and budgeting, and informal coordination systems. (see below)

Building competent institutions is essential. Choose good people, then enable them.

- Ministers are usually amateurs. It is usually the first time they have held positions in the cabinet. Help them by clarifying expectations and creating a clear decision structure.
- Invest in your own staff. If you need more help, invest only in short-term provision of experts and not long-term advisers. The international community has tended to help line agencies of governments by providing them with experts. People go to the advisers for help. This practice helps build competent institutions, over time.
- Any mode of service delivery that is personalized—i.e., “the president is giving you...”—is very demeaning. Build impersonal institutions. The ministers of local government and social welfare are both very important in this regard. They are close to people. Invest in them. Get good people in these roles and help them succeed.
- Expect people to do better. Say that to government officials. Expect your own staff to do better. If you expect them to do better they will do that. If they confront technical problems, help them yourself.
 - We laugh at Westerners because we say they write too much (memos). But we need to think methodically and writing does that. Get your cabinet members to write up a 6-month report is good for focusing the mind. When you read the submissions you get to understand and see weaknesses. This practice helps ensure that your cabinet members assimilate that “big thing.”
- Ultimate success in government is when you make people you work with feel they produced the results. The prime minister or president should not be saying “I did this and I did that.” But the prime minister or president must accept responsibility if something doesn’t go well. It is very important to say “It’s my bad.” “Things will work out OK.”

Pay attention to procedure. Work processes are hugely important.

- Work processes are as important as structures and mandates. Specify who will do what and how to hand off to the next person or function.
- A lot of coordination takes place at the junior level (or should take place at that level). It is helpful to have a procedure for convening “ad hocs” at the junior level and then on up to the ministerial level (chaired by the prime minister) so there is an escalation mechanism. “Sectoral committees” are another name for a similar structure.

- In OECD countries, there is often a dense network of inter-agency working groups, but the equivalent doesn't always exist elsewhere. One reason is that in some countries if you share knowledge without the minister's consent, you can get in trouble. As a result, everything is pushed to cabinet.
- The cabinet manual should spell out the consultation process, so no one is left out so when an issue comes through cabinet. Ministries can then own the process.
- Cabinet sub-committees can enhance policy analysis by convening principals around the development of options and evaluation of choices before the decisions reach the cabinet.
- It might be worth considering having a public notice or public hearing rule for important decisions so that stakeholders have time to comment.
- It may be helpful to require permanent secretaries or their equivalent meet each month to coordinate at a technical level.

Cabinet meetings

- It is helpful to have a meeting book. For every meeting the book says who was there and what they agreed. There is no record of other comments. The book is updated at the end of each week. It helps the president's office, the cabinet office, or delivery unit keep track of decisions and commitments.
- It is important to have regular meetings so that ministers and their deputies can plan their work effectively and be prepared. People should know that on Sunday or Monday or Tuesday...what will happen and what they have to do. Keep the meetings short, however. Ministers will grow to hate the meetings if they drag on for hours.
- Set a time limit of 90 minutes. The job of the prime minister is to make people follow the rules and adhere to the time limits. Have a clear agenda, keep minutes, and schedule a limited number of short presentations at each meeting ("X will brief the cabinet on the activities of his ministry and where it is in relation to the plan.").

Managing conflict and tension

- One way to handle competition among cabinet officers is for the president not to be involved in everything. Early on there is lots to be said for centralizing. First thing you have to do is centralize, with a view to devolving as move forward. Make that clear from the outset. Make sure civil society understands.
- The more accountability channels you bring in the more likely you are to succeed even in the absence of a legislature. If you do have a legislature, make sure the legislature has committees so that legislators can deal with government in adequate depth.

- “You can’t be an absolutist, ever. You must listen to your colleagues constantly and listen as long as it takes. Keep cabinet meetings time-limited. But you can require that ministers comment in writing on policy proposals and then talk through every point with you. Do it in their own language.”
- Look for compromises. You have a country to run. What’s worse than doing something the right way is doing nothing.

The power of personality is strong in post-conflict contexts. The majority of ministers don’t have backgrounds in policy, management. They change often. Building institutional resilience is what matters.

Delivery Units

Sometimes it is valuable to have a special unit to help track progress on goals, review policy documents, help ministers handle problems that cause delay or disruption, and carry out some of the work associated with strategy or innovation. However, these units can also create difficulties. Careful attention to structure, mandate, and practice is important.

Structure & process

If the delivery unit is situated within the cabinet office, it is easier for ministers to understand it as a support system than if it is a separate unit within the office of the president, where it may seem more like a disciplinary tool. If ministers feel they aren’t trusted and someone will always be tracking them, they may leave.

Because tracking progress necessarily means spotting bottlenecks, and because delay inevitably triggers questions from colleagues or the president or prime minister, delivery units can become a source of tension, even as they are an important means of coordination. It is important to design practices so that they help ministers build strong records of performance and not simply put them under pressure.

Helpful practices may include: 1) Ensuring that ministers have advance notice if the unit considers implementation off track (before colleagues and the president learn about the problem); 2) Providing the minister a support person who can help address problems; 3) Convening ministers or their deputies on an ad hoc basis to solve problems if the initiative in question requires coordination across institutions; 4) Ensuring that delivery unit staff, especially if young, receive careful coaching to help them interact effectively with senior ministers and civil servants.

A delivery unit can perform a useful function if its staff can canvas stakeholder views on impending policy decisions and report these objectively in a short, two-page memo.

In some countries, ministers and mayors sign performance contracts and the delivery unit data becomes part of an annual evaluation. This approach creates pressure, but not everyone agrees that it always contributes to better morale and better performance. Under what circumstances would this approach be more acceptable and more effective, and when might it just make it harder to recruit good people or deepen tension? (In many industrial countries, ministries develop and maintain their own KPIs. Ultimately you want the ministries to take responsibility.)

Because the delivery unit and finance ministry roles may sometimes parallel each other or overlap, close consultation between the two is important.

Measurement

The tracking system a delivery unit or aides use may help a president or prime minister review progress regularly and quickly, without having to store all that information in his/her head. However, the tracker has to be accurate, objective, and up to date in order to serve that purpose well.

There is a lot of magical thinking around data. The assumption behind tracking and performance is that if people see the data they will work harder. But that assumes they can achieve more if they work harder. In reality, there are many constraints and neither hard work nor individual problem solving can address all of them. A thoughtful executive must be skilled in looking at problems and asking “What is getting in the way?” .

There is selectivity in measurement. There is always a risk of agency or instrument being used for political purposes. How do you guard against that problem?

Be careful. A delivery unit can work against delivery if it forces scarce talent to spend massive amounts of time on monitoring and slows down the work. Delivery units have a mixed record. Of the 50 created about a third shut down and a third are functioning differently than originally designed.

Communication

Strategic communication is essential. In a conflict-affected country there is often a traumatized population. At the end of a war or the arrival of a new government, there is euphoria and people want improvement immediately. To build political space to get things done, it is important to manage expectations. You want to under promise and over-deliver.

Pay special attention to sensitive periods. Ramadan is a time when people in many countries need electrical power. If the electrical grid isn't up to that challenge, then the government has to explain carefully in advance what the infrastructure challenges are. Then if there are blackouts people will understand. It's not only talking about what has gone well but also explaining why some things don't work.

Getting the word out

- Effective means of communication vary across countries.

- Radio is very useful. People tend to listen to radio on way to work. Like NPR here. Do 5-minute radio segment. Forces you to be productive.
- Some governments have a regular radio broadcast after each cabinet meeting and announce any decisions that took place.
- The information minister or press officer can go on the radio each morning talking about what the government is trying to do. Some countries also host a weekly press briefing focused on a particular topic.
- One challenge is that in some countries there are few trained journalists and the people who call themselves journalists compete with each other by sensationalizing stories. Some require that you pay them before they will cover a policy initiative. Where people are users of Facebook, the government can communicate directly through that channel, but often that possibility does not exist. Visits (see below) are another partial solution to this problem.
- Some of the more successful middle income countries have nuanced communication in helpful ways. 1) They look for holidays or events that provide an opportunity to publicize what they have done. 2) They do integrated messaging. That is, they create themed weeks and coordinate messages across ministries to focus on that theme. 3) They think carefully about audiences and use different messages for each. 4) They pay attention to what people are concerned about or what's "trending" and how they can message to respond.

Creating a two-way channel of communication

- Several countries (for example, Rwanda, Colombia) have created a bottom-up system of consultation. Periodically the president and ministers visit each part of the country and hold a "town hall" meeting where citizens can ask questions and raise issues. "If you are visiting local officials have to be there. Helps direct public to them and elevate their responsibility. Don't undercut them."
- Citizen report cards can help keep government in touch with public perceptions. If there are resources, a government can have an outside group canvas a random sample of residents in each area and ask about satisfaction with government performance on selected issues. Some governments go a step farther and grade the responsible institutions "red, amber, yellow, or green" depending on performance level in a region.
- Broadcasting question periods, where citizens, including members of the diaspora, can ask questions of ministers and parliamentarians—or highlight problems—are important for communication and can also create pressure for ministers to respond. Having the diaspora take part is important.
- Another channel of communication is the sectoral council. These councils involve 10-15 people, the relevant stakeholders. The minister is there. There is a conversation back and forth.

- [There is some research that suggests trust isn't affected much by whether a government delivers. What matters most is that there is a grievance mechanism, a way to tell government that services aren't being delivered. However, this issue is the subject of on-going analysis and it may be premature to offer a broad generalization in this regard.]
- In conflict-affected countries security does not allow government officials to travel. The question is whether there are alternative means of reaching people, especially where access to electricity and to technology are sharply limited.

Making communications easier

- Having a vision helps make the communications challenge easier. The vision statement provides a structure that enhances messaging. It provides overall direction. Show how what is going on in a sector feeds back into the big idea. Sometimes something like Ebola throws you off but it's that big thing that is so important.
- There have to be rules about who can speak for the government, but allowing only the president or prime minister to speak sends the wrong message and allowing anyone to speak at any time leads to chaos. Ministers should have authority to speak on behalf of their ministries without getting permission. In a seminar they have to be able to speak.
- Sometimes it is best to go and listen first and don't use a prepared speech. Put yourself in frame of mind of listening

Cautions

- Do not cross the threshold into over-promising.
- When face to face with citizens you are in a situation where you make promises and you have to keep track of those promises and deliver. If you don't, trust further erodes. So there has to be a link between promises and tracking—like a delivery unit. Like a third channel, a feedback loop.
- Avoid the use of speeches to set policy and don't use a speech to "bounce" or criticize colleagues.
- If you visit communities only at end of term you are opening yourself up to cynicism.
- When you form a government you want to be representative. So you do get ministers that are also regional representatives and they may visit regions too, along with local government officials. Listen. speak less.

Relationships to the legislature and other parts of government.

The relationship with legislature will sometimes be a little sticky. But it is critical. For example, the need to appear before the legislature pushes leaders to build their knowledge and skills. And without a legislature the auditor general, courts, anti-corruption authorities, and other accountability structures cannot really be independent. They are only able to be independent if their leaders do not owe their jobs to the executive alone—that is, if the legislature must confirm their appointments. Without this check “accountability” institutions become instruments for penalizing opposition and competitors.

Are there ways to maximize the benefits of the relationship?

Challenges

Some legislatures are stronger than others. Some just rubber stamp whatever the executive brings to them. There may also be collusion between legislators and parts of the executive. For the executive, it is helpful to have a capable legislature, however.

Utility of committees

Subcommittees of parliament are a useful communication channel. It is helpful if these mirror the cabinet subcommittees.

The committees encourage government officers to do their own work. A good part of governing is about upgrading your own capabilities. The committees contribute valuably in this regard. We are less insular if we talk to the legislature, but if that conversation is limited to the plenary then it’s all about grandstanding. Committees help build knowledge.

Legislatures are, by design, adversarial. That’s their job. The government should chill out, crack a joke, and deal with the grandstanding in a good way that builds government credibility. Open meetings are an antidote to grandstanding. If politicians trivialize too much, people see it. Excessive behavior is visible.

Rwanda’s constitution embeds powersharing as a constitutional principle and states that the president and PM can’t come from same party. This provision is supposed to encourage confidence building. Similarly, within the legislature’s standing committees there is an agreement that the committee chairs will not all come from the majority party.

Procedure

One issue is who is authorized to submit draft bills or agreements to the legislature for approval. A new government should clarify the division of labor in a handbook, especially if delivery units, the chief of staff, and ministries have overlapping responsibilities.

Public hearings are a valuable measure. The legislature should hold public hearings—days on which civil society organizations can comment on legislation.

Donor Coordination

The aim of coordination is to un-complicate things, especially in a crisis. (In a disaster, you may want to invite the donors to sit at the table with the ministers in order to quickly decide on responsibilities and fund them.)

To coordinate with NGOs and others that are building schools and other facilities, some countries form joint action development forums. All international NGOs meet together with public institutions in each district. Leaders are elected internally. Civil society sometimes leads these meetings. This practice helps with coordination and self evaluation. It ensure partners meet commitments and reduces overlap.

International aid often strangles the reform. Outside priorities dominate internal perceptions of what is important. Further, the government isn't visible as the source of improvements or services. It gets no goodwill bonus.