



## INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

### FROM FEAR TO HOPE IN COLOMBIA: SERGIO FAJARDO AND MEDELLÍN, 2004 - 2007

#### SYNOPSIS

Inaugurated as mayor of Medellín at the beginning of 2004, Sergio Fajardo inherited a city roiled by decades of violence and corruption. During his four years in office, the charismatic former university professor turned Medellín around. He broke up clientelistic political networks, raised tax receipts, improved public services, introduced transparency fairs, established civic pacts, and restored citizens' sense of hope. Fajardo left office at the end of 2007 with an unprecedented approval rating of nearly 90%. Though Medellín still faced significant challenges, the city was later identified as an exemplary case of good public administration by cities across Latin America and the Inter-American Development Bank. By 2010, Fajardo had been named the vice-presidential running mate of former Bogotá mayor Antanas Mockus in that year's presidential elections.

*Matthew Devlin and Sebastian Chaskel drafted this case study on the basis of interviews conducted in Colombia during October and November of 2009. Case published December 2010.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Medellín, Colombia's second-largest municipality after the capital of Bogotá, was a beautiful place to live before the drug trade took control. The city straddled the Medellín River, which flowed through the narrow and picturesque Aburrá Valley atop Colombia's western Andean mountain range. At an elevation of 1,500 meters above sea level, Medellín was called "the City of Everlasting Spring" because of its mild and comfortable year-round climate. Located on the main transit route between the country's Pacific and Atlantic ports, Medellín was Colombia's commercial capital. Beyond the valley's ridgeline stretched an economic hinterland that encompassed some of the country's most profitable agricultural and mining interests.

Medellín's allure faded in the early 1980s, when the rapid growth of Colombia's cocaine industry signaled the beginning of the city's darkest decades. The powerful Medellín cartel recruited armies of adolescent assassins, bought off the city's politicians and police, infiltrated the national congress and finally declared open war on the Colombian state. By the time the cartel was smashed in the mid-1990s, Medellín had the world's highest homicide rate—nearly 400 per 100,000 people.

The cartel's demise did little to slow the violence. By the late 1990s, right-wing paramilitaries had poured into the power vacuum and seized control of the drug trade. These groups first overran pockets of leftist guerrillas in the city's hillside slums before eventually turning

on each other in 2001. Poorer *barrios* farther up the valley's slopes became war zones. In 2002, two years before Sergio Fajardo became Medellín's mayor, the national government deployed army commandos and helicopter gunships in a bid to regain some semblance of control over the city.

"To put it in one word: fear," recalled David Escobar, Fajardo's chief of staff, in an interview in late 2009. "Medellín was living in fear."

The city's decades-long descent into chaos coincided with a national decentralization process. The Colombian state was divided into three administrative tiers: national, departmental and municipal. Until 1988, power had been concentrated at the national level, with presidents appointing governors and mayors who had limited powers. Decentralization began with the first popular election of mayors in 1988 and culminated in the 1991 promulgation of a new constitution that greatly increased the powers and responsibilities of municipal governments.

Decentralization, however, failed to fix Medellín's problems. Prior to the reform, the city's appointed mayors were widely viewed as unaccountable, incapable and corrupt. After the change, elected mayors were clientelistic party bosses who regularly claimed that the city's problems were so overwhelming that they could be solved only by the national government's intervention.

In 1999, Sergio Fajardo ran for mayor as an independent candidate. Left-leaning activists managed his campaign, some of whom had tried to run for office without success. Although Fajardo came from one of Medellín's wealthiest families, he managed to bridge the city's broad class divisions. Sporting his signature jeans and refusing to wear a tie, Fajardo canvassed the streets of poorer neighborhoods, building an image of accessibility and a reputation for sympathizing with the average citizen.

Despite Fajardo's populist approach, business

interests that held significant sway over the city's politics viewed him as one of their own. After all, Fajardo and his family moved in the same social circles, went to the same parties and were members of the same clubs. As a result, he was able to appeal to both ends of the economic spectrum, inspiring the poor while reassuring the wealthy.

Nevertheless, a candidate who was actively supported by Medellín's traditional parties trounced Fajardo in the election. Undeterred, he ran again in 2003. He pledged to combat endemic corruption and restore the city to its past glory. He refused to seek the endorsement of traditional political parties and ran solely on the merits of his platform.

This time he swept to victory with the most votes ever received by any mayoral candidate, aided by a string of high-profile scandals near the end of his predecessor's tenure. The landslide victory reflected the mood of an electorate fed up with flagrant corruption and betting that Medellín's first independent mayor could overcome deeply entrenched interests and create responsive local government. Because of Colombia's ban on consecutive mayoral terms, Fajardo had three years to deliver on those hopes.

## THE CHALLENGE

Though Fajardo faced many pressing challenges, violence wasn't one of them. By the time he came into office in 2004, the national government had entered into negotiations with the paramilitary groups controlling the city's cocaine trade. For the rest of Fajardo's term in office, the paramilitaries largely honored their side of the agreements and refrained from overt violence. In this sense, Fajardo's timing was fortuitous. Crime rates plummeted, especially the number of murders. While the national government deserved the credit for bringing the paramilitaries to the negotiating table, the Fajardo administration, for its part, oversaw an effective

demobilization and reintegration of paramilitaries within the city.

Corruption, or what Fajardo called “the main tax that the poor pay,” was foremost among the challenges still confronting the city. Corruption had found a breeding ground within the upper echelons of the liberals and the conservatives, the parties that had dominated Colombian politics and from which every prior mayor of Medellín had been drawn. “To give you a number,” said Escobar, “Medellín was, according to independent polls, the least transparent city regarding public procurement in all of Colombia. So, to put it simply, we were the most corrupt city.” Escobar was in his late 20s when he joined the administration as both chief of staff and spokesman for the city’s youth, a generation that had never experienced anything but parasitic government.

Medellín’s problems reached well beyond the mayor’s office. In the city council, a bastion of old-style politicking, councilmen would trade votes for control over government jobs and contracts, insisting their demands be met before approving any of the mayor’s budget requests. Fajardo had only one ally among the council’s 21 members. Escobar was blunt about the situation the new administration faced: “Traditional politicians and many ‘informed’ people, were saying, ‘The City Council is going to swallow you without even chewing.’”

Corrupt government had led to abysmal public services. Education was perhaps the worst problem, especially in the city’s poorer sectors. “In Medellín, you open the water tap in a five-star hotel or in a poor neighborhood and you get the same high quality of water,” said Jorge Melguizo, a former Fajardo cabinet member. “But if you open the education taps in a rich neighborhood and in a poor neighborhood, the quality of education that would come out, well, that would be very different, radically different.”

Decades of corruption and inaction had

eroded citizens’ trust in government. While many residents of Medellín were sure that they wanted change, they were far less confident that Fajardo could deliver it. Fajardo would have to live up to the electorate’s expectations and be prepared to weather intense cynicism. He faced a political establishment that did not want reform and a public that did not really think it possible.

### FRAMING A RESPONSE

Fajardo said one of his favorite maxims on governing was “Once you get into power, you have to know exactly what you want to do.” With this in mind, he was adamant that the first step toward progress would be to take the time to identify and understand the obstacles he faced. He stressed that a crucial step in his reform effort was taking the time to identify obstacles, a move that allowed him to break down the overwhelming set of problems into tangible challenges. “When you are facing so many problems as we were,” said Beatriz White, Fajardo’s former secretary of social wellbeing, “it is tempting to think that because your understanding is a kilometer wide and you have accounted for all the issues, you can get started. In fact, your understanding must be a kilometer wide but also a kilometer deep.”

Prior to his unsuccessful 1999 mayoral bid, Fajardo had gathered a “Group of 50” supporters from the private sector, academia and nongovernmental organizations. Though few of them had direct experience in public office, each had expertise in a relevant field, such as finance or education. And all shared Fajardo’s conviction that they needed to hold political power if they were ever to achieve a large-scale and lasting change. The group was his brain trust, and he would turn to it throughout his administration for ideas and constructive criticism.

In the run-up to his October 2003 election victory and in the months before his inauguration, Fajardo asked this group—by then numbering about 200 people—to identify and analyze the

priority problems facing the city. The group broke into about 25 thematic workgroups, each focusing on a specific topic such as health, the economy or education.

Fajardo chose White, the former leader of a non-governmental organization, to head the social-issues workgroup. She remembered that he asked her and her colleagues “to write documents, to do studies, to speak a lot with people, with academics, with scientists, but also with common people in the neighborhoods so that we would understand very well what the problem was in the city.”

Fajardo stayed actively involved with the workgroups. As White recalled, “In that task, Sergio participated 100%. He was involved in all the issues and he would take notes, give opinions; he would organize the work. He would tell people to stop dreaming and to return to earth, to be more realistic.”

Fajardo used his time to identify not just problems but personnel. The heads of the workgroups were, in effect, Fajardo’s cabinet-in-waiting. He said he evaluated people based on five attributes: “In the first place: honesty. Secondly: knowledge, people who knew what they were going to do, and they knew about the issues that they are dealing with. Third: passion. ... We wanted to ensure that all that we had dreamed about became a reality. Fourth, you have to have a team of people who have social sensibility. They must understand the place, understand people’s needs and feelings and dreams and pains. Finally, we have to have decency in the way we relate to people.” He later adopted these qualities as basic criteria for hiring staff.

Fajardo stressed the importance of this opportunity to evaluate potential cabinet members’ performance. “The way you choose your team is crucial, so that you will be able to do what you want to do,” he said. Careful vetting was especially important because he would be bringing in an entire cabinet with little to no

experience in government and no ties to traditional political parties’ support networks.

## GETTING DOWN TO WORK

However carefully Fajardo had thought about staffing his reform team, he still had to deal with the city council. The process of getting approval for a development plan was the first real clash between Fajardo’s administration and the council, which had a reputation as a bastion of patronage politics and corruption. Reading Fajardo’s plan, councilmen saw many strange-sounding references to empirical analysis and quantifiable metrics but none of the sweetheart deals they were accustomed to.

Nevertheless, in the end the council approved the plan unanimously. This unlikely success was possible for several reasons. First, Fajardo entered office with an advantage. He was the first mayor to have run an independent campaign, which meant that he owed no political debts. He stressed this as a key piece of advice to any aspiring reform leader: “Don’t negotiate away the city during the elections, because the way you get into power will define the way you will be able to handle the administration.”

Fajardo’s landslide victory, and the knowledge that it had been achieved without any traditional electoral machine, bolstered his position with the council. For the first time, councilmen had to seriously consider the consequences of opposing a popular mayor. “Openly confronting ... his enormous popularity,” one close Fajardo aide said, “would have been like political suicide.”

Second, Fajardo picked his battles meticulously. Jorge Melguizo, the former Fajardo cabinet member and a longtime insider of city politics, said Fajardo “did not mess with the public servants who were already working for the city. There was a lot of fear within the public servants when we showed up. All of the people who were already there, almost all of them, had

been put there by some politician or another at one point in the past. They assumed that with the coming of a new movement ... Fajardo was going to start purging them. But Fajardo said, 'We're going to build a new administration in the city with the people we already have.'" By pledging to work hand-in-hand with city employees, Fajardo was able to head off significant opposition from this important group and to limit his fight to one room of 20 people—the council.

Third, Fajardo was extremely conscious of the way in which he dealt with the council itself. He said he was explicit and to the point: "From the very beginning we said that there were no contracts for anyone here ... that we were not going to give positions in the bureaucracy as loot to politicians." Melguizo stressed the importance of firmly applying this strategy. "He [Fajardo] did not open a window," Melguizo said. "He knew that if you open that window, it is impossible to close it. He had to be coherent in this rhetoric."

Fajardo said he was able to maintain this zero-tolerance approach by refusing to talk about anything but strategic goals. He would not debate details with councilmen, avoiding discussions that might open the door for small yet cumulatively destructive concessions from him. Melguizo highlighted this as an extremely effective tactic: "He would sit down with the councilmen to speak about structural issues, not about details: 'We're going to work on education. What are your proposals? What are your concepts? How are we going to make this work?'" And he would only accept this type of discussion. He did not accept discussion about details. And it worked."

Fajardo traced much of his subsequent success in dealing with council opposition to this early point when "we defined the ground where we were going to interact."

However, Fajardo also tempered this hard-line stance with a commitment to dealing with all councilmen equally, regardless of party affiliation. A former cabinet member said, "As long as we

didn't favor a few, ... if we treat them equally, they won't bother us because they all know that none of them will receive specific benefits."

While Fajardo often appeared uncompromising, councilmen learned that they could trust him to treat them equally, something not unimportant in the zero-sum power dynamic that existed within the group.

Fajardo also made a concerted effort to give the councilmen the chance to change their ways. Councilmen rarely viewed probity as a worthwhile political trait. Though times had changed, it made great sense to at least give these men the chance to adapt and live up to novel expectations. Escobar, the former chief of staff, recalled, "We told them, 'You are good people. By definition you are decent. We are not prejudging you.'" As he had done with the city employees, Fajardo adopted a respectful demeanor in an attempt to reset a dysfunctional relationship. "We asked them to get involved with whatever ideas they had so that our projects could be improved—could be improved, it's a key word—so that they would also feel part of what was going to be happening," Fajardo said. The tactic produced some interesting results: One councilman publicly acknowledged his disreputable past and committed to upstanding conduct from that point forward.

Importantly, Fajardo allowed the councilmen to take the credit for his administration's achievements. While he rejected all illicit requests from councilmen, he also made sure that they would not walk away empty-handed. Escobar recalled: "All we did was offer them public acknowledgement: 'You are supporting me on education. I don't care if you are from the Liberal or Conservative party, or that you were saying that I was incapable of governing or stupid or corrupt. I'm going to say that you helped us—in front of your people, your constituents.'" So that method, it was very simple but it was very successful."

One of Fajardo's top education advisers, for

example, said that he could overcome a large number of councilmen's objections by simply telling them, "You can say it was your idea, and you'll be invited to all the press events."

All these tactics contributed to Fajardo's success in winning the council's unanimous approval of the development plan. Getting all the councilmen to approve the plan was pivotal; when objections later arose over some project or other, Fajardo could point to the detailed description of that project in the development plan and the recalcitrant councilman's signatures below. Exhaustive planning served just as much of a political purpose as it did a practical one.

Any plan, however, would inevitably have to be adapted as situations evolved over the years. This raised the possibility that the council would jump on any amendment requests as fresh opportunities to demand concessions. Fajardo was therefore careful to include a "budgeting based on results" provision within all plans. This provision authorized his administration to reallocate the budget between separate lines based on the prior year's performance. If a program was clearly underfunded or running behind schedule, for example, excess resources from another budget line could be redirected toward it. Given that every project had been assigned extremely clear goals and measures of success, it was relatively easy for Fajardo to go to the council and make a strong argument for budget adjustments without opening the door to demands for concessions. Federico Restrepo, Fajardo's director for planning, said, "Discussion became objective and perfectly justifiable in terms of numbers and data. The level of subjectivity, which is usually associated with political negotiations, went down drastically."

### *Building public trust*

Fajardo's ability to manage affairs within the municipal government was only part of the struggle. Though extremely popular as a

candidate, the novice mayor had to build and sustain fresh public support for his initiatives. It became clear nearly immediately that this effort would not be easy.

The administration's initial approach was to push for quick wins on initiatives that were relatively cheap and yet yielded immediate, quantifiable results. One example involved Mother's Day, about four months into Fajardo's tenure. Surprisingly, Mother's Day was often one of the most violent days of the year for Colombia, as families gathered and long-running disputes erupted. The administration launched a public-awareness campaign and succeeded in reducing the homicide rate for that day by 40% from the preceding year.

Though early achievements sometimes seemed trivial, Escobar said, the administration nevertheless seized on them and heavily publicized each success: "We knew that we had the responsibility of creating and generating hope and moving that hope forward ... in order to open some space for our political actions. So we were celebrating absolutely anything that could be considered a victory."

From the beginning, Fajardo recognized the value of effective communication with the electorate. "Once you have a new government," he said, "right away people will start saying, 'Well, let's see what these guys have to say and show us.' We were always saying, 'We are planning so we don't have to improvise,' and we explained from day zero what we were doing."

Fajardo wrote newspaper columns and gave radio interviews in which he was frank about the challenges the city faced and any setbacks his administration encountered. One of Fajardo's close associates recalled, "He would say, 'I don't know how to solve this problem. I need help from the entrepreneurs, I need help from the business people, the scientists, etc.' And he started calling everyone to participate in the process of planning. So people felt that this was

also theirs. That was very strategic.”

Fajardo appeared on television every Thursday evening, on his show “With the Mayor.” During the hour-and-a-half program, citizens could call in to ask him questions. He was consistent with his rhetoric, to the point where everyone was familiar with responses such as “we are planning in order not to improvise” and his insistence that “public funds are sacred” and that therefore work could not be rushed. After Fajardo introduced a project to the public, he would always deliver regular updates until its completion, consistently stressing the government’s accountability to the electorate.

Asked why his communication strategy was effective, Fajardo reflected that, for the first time, the people of Medellín “actually saw things happening—that was very powerful.” In addition to making his case in the media, the mayor walked around the city, dedicating a great deal of time to talking with people. Melguizo recalled, “People had the perception that Fajardo was in the street every day. We continued to go to neighborhoods where a mayor had never been before. ... The people, instead of pressuring, said ‘OK, let’s wait and see what’s up.’”

#### *Maintaining public support*

Sustaining public support over the long run required that Fajardo complement his communication campaign with systematic and direct involvement of the public. One of the ways he achieved this was through “civic pacts,” agreements between the city administration and the local neighborhoods or communities that would be most closely affected by a government project or other action.

These pacts were part of a process by which representatives of the mayor’s office would meet with community leaders to explain planned projects, collect public feedback and enlist local support. After the community’s concerns had been incorporated into the designs, local leaders

and municipal officials (often Fajardo himself) would sign an agreement that committed the city to faithfully execute the project and the community to contribute in some way, such as providing maintenance. Fajardo’s office would then distribute copies of the pact throughout the neighborhood and publicize its signing citywide on television before work would begin.

Civic pacts ensured a sense of ownership among the local communities by strengthening the sustainability of government projects and programs. Fajardo also intended them to serve as a pedagogical exercise in which populations long abandoned by government would learn about the importance of public involvement in city affairs. Many citizens would, for the first time, develop an awareness of what they could contribute to collective endeavors, no matter how humble their means, and, perhaps more importantly, a sense of what they were entitled to expect from the government.

Fajardo used pacts for purposes as varied as maintaining public infrastructure works, facilitating the resolution of disputes over public housing and regulating hours of operation for bars and night street vendors. While enforcing follow-up was a challenge that his administration never quite overcame, the consultative process and the signed agreements represented a historic enfranchisement of people who had been either oblivious to government or deeply resentful of it. “This was a city that had been very fragmented, that was built on inequality and isolation ... a city that really benefited just a few,” Melguizo said. “The construction of collective projects took us toward an idea of citizenship and beyond just being a city.”

Fajardo also enlisted citizen support for his agenda by opening the planning and budgeting process to public participation. The administration allowed neighborhood communities to decide how to spend small portions of the budget allocated to their areas.

According to Fajardo, this process gave people a sense of ownership of government efforts, increased their political awareness, and bolstered public faith in the capacities and responsiveness of municipal authorities.

With these two initiatives, Medellín's government became accessible to the average citizen in a way that had been unimaginable. "When people feel that they are included in what is happening, their reaction is always positive," Fajardo recalled. "We said, 'Let's do it together,' and, for the very first time, I think many voices were heard that hadn't been taken into account before."

### *Transparency*

Fajardo's efforts to increase the public's support and involvement dovetailed with his struggle to break up corrupt, clientelistic networks. High-profile communication served to reinforce Fajardo's zero-tolerance approach to patronage requests, as Escobar remembered: "What we did was design a new way of political discussion. ... Everything was transparent. You could see it on the website, on TV, on the local newspaper. So it was very difficult to plan any kind of extortion if you were considering it."

Fajardo stressed that "transparency is the equivalent of trust, and that is the best political capital you can have." By shining a bright light on the functions of government, he earned public credibility and respect that empowered him to take a firm stand against what he called the council's contracting "irregularities." He committed the mayor's office to publishing all information related to the city's contracting processes online and issuing a formal report on all projects under contract at least once a year.

Fajardo also organized an annual "transparency in contracting fair," where the city would rent a conference hall and hold a public, day-long event informing citizens of available contracts for the coming fiscal year, the amount of

funds involved, and how to enter a bid for each of them. As a result, Medellín went from contracting with 8,000 outside providers in 2003 to 27,000 in 2007.

Anticorruption efforts, government transparency and public support intersected again in the case of taxes. When Fajardo took office, the city's financial situation was dire; Medellín had only seven billion pesos with which to pay bills totaling 84.4 billion pesos. While some of the subsequent improvements were due to improved management within the finance secretariat and firmer enforcement of penalties, former city officials insisted that the greatest boost came after Fajardo raised the public profile of the finances issue.

The administration put up signs at every public-works construction site and wherever the city was providing new services, proclaiming, "Here are your taxes at work." Each sign provided a detailed description of the project, the municipal agencies responsible for it, the direct telephone number of the designated overseer, and the total cost to taxpayers. For the first time, citizens began to believe that their taxes might not simply be vanishing into politicians' pockets.

While only 54,000 individuals and companies submitted industrial and commercial tax returns in 2003, over 78,000 did so during 2007—an increase of nearly 45%. Fajardo seized upon this window of goodwill and ordered an otherwise unpopular update of the city's land survey, bringing an extra 14.9 million square meters of property into the tax base.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Fajardo was acutely aware that in order to sustain support through the end of his term, he had to establish a flagship initiative that would catch and hold broad public favor. A dedicated teacher himself, he settled upon education as his cause célèbre, subsuming all his other varied efforts under the slogan "Medellín: The Most

Educated.” As Fajardo put it: “Whatever we did, we explained it around this narrative about education understood in the broad sense.”

Not everyone, however, wanted to hear that story. Medellín had 11,000 unionized teachers at the time. Fajardo’s explicit pledge to revamp the public-school system drew immediate hostility from the union, as its members feared that any change would come at their expense.

The teachers were correct to be wary, because revamping education often meant replacing teachers. Escobar recalled, “When I was a freshman at the City Hall, beginning our tenure there, I received a visit from some consultants on education from the Inter-American Development Bank. I remember what they told me at the dinner that night. They said that the only way to improve education in Latin America is to get rid of the teachers. I said: ‘Yes, very good, consultant. That’s legally and technically impossible. But even worse, if I declare the teachers my enemies and I say that they are bad, the bad ones are going to be worse, and the good ones are going to be mediocre, and I’m going to have 11,000 enemies. I’m going to have strikes all the time.’”

In fact, the teachers did not strike during Fajardo’s term in office. An initial confidence-building measure proved crucial. When administration leaders first met with the teachers, they found that one of the union’s greatest complaints was that the city often paid teachers weeks and even months late. Officials found that the problem stemmed from a relatively simple cash-flow issue. Funds for teachers’ salaries came from the national Ministry of Education, which often delayed the paychecks because of various administrative problems. The city’s policy was to pay individual salaries only after the funds were received. Fajardo fixed the problem by setting aside funds within the education budget to advance teachers their pay whenever salary funds were late arriving from Bogotá. As a result, he was able to promise the teachers that they would

never have to wait a single day for what was rightfully theirs.

Fajardo decided that any improvement in the public schools relied on the cooperation of the teachers. He was explicit about capitalizing on his background as an educator: “I talked about education. I recognized myself as a teacher, so this created a different atmosphere. ... We didn’t go to schools and to the teachers saying that they were bad. We said, ‘We are all good, and let’s work together.’”

An annual teachers’ gala took center stage in this effort, during which Fajardo presented prizes and publicly recognized the city’s best teachers. Each year, the city’s largest convention center would fill to capacity. The hugely popular event marked a turning point, in Escobar’s opinion: “That was the most important day of the year for us, and for them. ... It was the only day of the year when Fajardo wore a tie. ... We created in their minds the sense of dignity. If you are treated with dignity, you’ll do things better. Maybe the math teacher is not going to be good simply because you are being nice with him or her. But they will do better than they are right now. That was the same philosophy with the work with the rest of the public servants.”

Fajardo also turned to the familiar model of civic pacts in working to transform 101 struggling public schools into showcase “quality schools.” The municipal government collaborated with these schools to develop a “quality pact” which would be signed by Fajardo, the school’s administrators, teachers, students and parents. Fajardo promised to renovate and resupply the school, while teachers and students pledged to do their best, and parents committed to providing local oversight.

Within four years, the percentage of public high school students performing at below-average levels on the national standardized graduation test dropped to 11.6% from 65%. In the same period, the proportion testing above average rose to 36.9%

from 6.4%. These achievements, Escobar stressed, were the result of going against external, conventional advice. “We didn’t create a complex system of incentives for them, as some people said it should be,” Escobar said. “We never did that. What we did was say, ‘You are all by definition good teachers, you are going to work with us and we’re going to celebrate every success you have.’”

## ASSESSING RESULTS

A fair assessment of Fajardo’s term must address the fact that despite his success in dealing with several major problems, he simply never got around to tackling others. While he confronted corruption within City Hall, he left untouched similar problems within the police force. Though he did get tough on high-profile councilmen, he left intact the secondary and tertiary levels of their patronage networks within the municipal bureaucracy. Fajardo’s supporters argued that he picked his battles wisely, and they dismissed claims that his ambitious public-works programs were driven by presidential ambitions.

Still, no one can dispute that outside events helped Fajardo, in that his term coincided with a truce between the national government and the city’s paramilitary gangs. Soon after he left office, however, the calm began to fray, and rival gangs returned to fighting one another for control over Medellín’s lucrative drug trade. During 2007, Fajardo’s last year in office, there had been 654 murders in Medellín. In 2009, there were 2,899. It was unclear whether the subsequent administration (overwhelmingly drawn from former Fajardo cabinet members and supporters) would be able to address the new challenge of rampant violent crime while sustaining advances in other sectors like education.

## REFLECTIONS

Sergio Fajardo’s successes as mayor of Medellín offer clear lessons. Patient and exhaustive planning served political as well as

practical ends; impartial empiricism was a valuable asset. Fajardo never viewed open confrontation as unavoidable; reformers always attempted to reset historically dysfunctional dynamics by giving opponents a legitimate opportunity to change their ways in a face-saving manner. If the fight had to be joined, it was closely circumscribed.

Fajardo would deliberate issues only in objective, quantifiable terms. This allowed him and his team to raise the level of the debate and avoid becoming entangled in details behind closed doors. Fajardo never forced opponents into a corner and always offered them something to walk away with, often high-profile publicity.

Lastly, Fajardo’s team recognized that one of the best ways to secure long-term public support was to promote public involvement and to foster a sense of popular ownership of government initiatives.

When Fajardo left office at the end of 2007, Medellín had undergone a transformation. The city had been on the brink of collapse just four years earlier, and the Inter-American Development Bank was now touting it as an example of effective municipal government. High approval ratings catapulted Fajardo into Colombia’s presidential race and attested to his success in restoring government’s legitimacy. “The overarching achievement of the administration of Sergio Fajardo was recovering the trust of the community in the public sector,” said Jorge Melguizo, a former Fajardo cabinet member.

Looking back in 2009 on his mayoralty and his approach to government, Fajardo had this to say: “The way we behaved from day zero up to today has been perfectly coherent. We had a set of basic principles that we have respected all the time. We have been coherent in what we say and what we represent. And that’s the crucial thing. And we never backed off in front of a problem. We always moved forward.

“They always told me that we were crazy.

They always told me that it was impossible, that it didn't make sense, that we had to do it the other way. And yet, here we are."

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